

## Mike Hershberger

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in early May 2009.  
Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2009.*

*Every team in major league baseball is known for something. The Yankees, for example, are known for winning championships regardless of cost and for power hitters...the Red Sox are known for a fan base that considers themselves, "long suffering" and capitalizes in every way they can on that self-imposed moniker. The Cubs are known for losing in the most ridiculous fashion possible and for being a staple of jokes on late night television.*

*And the White Sox? They are known for the "Black Sox Scandal," great pitching, speed and defense, fabulous Latin shortstops and good defensive center fielders. Starting with Oscar "Happy" Felsch and running through guys like Jim Landis, Tommy Agee, Ken Berry, Chet Lemon, Rudy Law and Lance "One Dog" Johnson, the Sox have always placed a premium on having a guy in center that could pick 'em*

*One Sox outfielder of the 1960's who almost cracked that historical list was Mike Hershberger. The Ohio native was playing both football and baseball at the University of Cincinnati when he signed a contract and within a few years was on the South Side and named to the Topps All-Rookie Team in 1962. Good years in 1963 and 1964 followed but "Hershy" was unexpectedly traded before the start of the 1965 season. He could catch the baseball either in center or right field, where he played under manager Al Lopez.*

*Mike got a second chance with the franchise when he returned for the 1971 season under manager Chuck Tanner, who used his desire to bring him back to the big club as an issue to consolidate his power and make sure that everyone knew that he and Player Personnel Director Roland Hemond were running the show.*

*Overall Mike spent four seasons with the Sox as well as playing for the Kansas City – Oakland Athletics and the Milwaukee Brewers. Now retired and back in Ohio, I caught up with him at his home in early May. Mike reflected back on his rise in the minor leagues, his first game in a White Sox uniform, playing under Al Lopez and later Chuck Tanner and that sensational 1964 pennant race.*

**ML:** Mike you cut short a football career at the University of Cincinnati to sign with the White Sox. Tell us how that all came about and who scouted you?

**MH:** Fred Shaffer had been scouting me since I was in high school but I went to Cincinnati on a football scholarship instead. I also played on the baseball team and he kept after me. I had won the freshman M.V.P. award and they were expecting me to be the starting running back my sophomore year but I wanted to play baseball and when Fred kept after me I was really torn between what I wanted to do. Finally, one of my assistant coaches asked me what was wrong and I told him I didn't know what to do, so he asked me a simple question, did I want to play baseball? I said "yes" and he said "then that's what you need to do", so I signed with the Sox.

**ML:** You started out in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1959 and by September 1961 were up with the big club. Less than three years in the minors for that time period was a quick rise, did playing ball just come easily to you?

**MH:** I was in the right place at the right time. You have to have some luck in this game and I had my share. I started out slowly at Lincoln and they were considering sending me down but decided to give me a little more time and I started to play better. I did well in Charleston, South Carolina and then had a good season at San Diego which was the Sox Triple-A club. The Sox had already told me that I was going to get called up when our season ended but early in September, Jim Landis got hurt so they changed that time frame and brought me up to the major leagues.

I actually took a pay cut to go to the Sox (laughing). I signed a three-year contract for 25 thousand dollars... the final year in San Diego I was getting eight thousand and when the Sox brought me up I only got seven thousand. But I didn't care; it was the fact that I was wearing that uniform.

**ML:** Like I mentioned you got called up in September 1961 and played your first game at Minnesota. Tell me about that night because apparently the weather was a little odd which made your debut a little more unusual.

*(Author's Note: Hershberger played his first game on September 5, 1961. He went 1 for 3 with a single off Jack Kralick in his second at bat. The game ended in a three all tie.)*

**MH:** That game in Minnesota had some bad fog. You just couldn't see the ball. Harmon Killebrew hit one out to me that I lost for a second or two in it, I was able to get it back in view when it came down but it was almost impossible to see anything. Until you told me about it, I didn't remember that the game ended in a tie.

**ML:** By 1962 you were a regular in the Sox lineup, playing in 148 games. Were the big leagues everything you expected it to be?

*(Author's Note: That season Mike hit .262 with four home runs, 46 RBI's and 10 stolen bases.)*

**MH:** Like I said I was just happy to have made the club. I wasn't expected to. The Sox had won the pennant in 1959 and were a very good veteran club. They had some kids like me on the team, but they weren't going to play much. Originally Al Smith was in left field, with Jimmy (Landis) in center and Floyd Robinson in right. The Sox had acquired Charlie Smith from the Phillies to play third base. But that season Charlie dove and separated his shoulder, so they moved Al to third, Floyd to left and stuck me in there in right field. So when you consider all that you understand what I mean when I say you have to have some luck. I think for the first half of the year I was the only guy on the team to have played in every game up to that point so I was fortunate.

**ML:** Here's an off the wall question, in the early 60's generally players didn't wear numbers in the 40's, yet you had #40 in your first stint with the Sox. Was there something special to you about that number or is that the number you were given?

**MH:** Boy you know I'd never thought of that. It wasn't special to me. I wore #42 in high school when I played football. I think it was just what the Sox had available and they gave it to me. Remember I wasn't supposed to be up until a few weeks later, then Jim (Landis) got hurt and I got recalled earlier so they may not have had time to do a lot of thinking in that regard.

**ML:** You played both center field and right field for the most part in your first stint with the Sox. What were the differences, from your perspective, in the positions?

**MH:** For me it was easier to see the ball and the angle coming off the bat when I was in center field. Also in center field you took control of the game. That's one of the areas Jimmy (Landis) was so good at; he knew exactly what was going on and was sure to let everyone else know about it in the outfield. He controlled the game. When I played in right field and he was in center we both knew exactly what each other were going to do depending on where the ball was hit.

**ML:** 1963 was the start of one of the finest stretches of baseball in franchise history, three straight seasons with 90 or more wins. In 1963 the club won 94 games and that was with serious injuries to first baseman Joe Cunningham and pitcher Johnny Buzhardt. Personally you hit .279 with 26 doubles, 45 RBI's and nine stolen bases. As somebody who was around those guys every day, why did that team and the 1964 and 65' clubs play as well as they did?

*(Author's Note: With the Sox in first place in 1963 another freak injury occurred reminiscent of past bizarre circumstances that cost the team dearly. First baseman Joe Cunningham, who hit .295, with 70 RBI's and 101 walks in 1962, broke his collarbone in Los Angeles running out a ground ball in the 5<sup>th</sup> inning on June 3. Cunningham was trying to avoid stepping on Angel's first baseman Charlie Dees' foot, so he twisted and lost his balance, tripping over the bag and crashing down on the ground. It was a wild throw from shortstop Billy Moran that started the sequence. Joe didn't return to the lineup until September 4. Buzhardt, who passed away last year, was off to a 9-4 start with a 2.42 ERA when a sore shoulder put him out of action from July 23 to the end of the season.)*

**MH:** We had success because we played as a team. We went out together as a team; we ran as a team, we joked around as a team. We'd go out to dinner after a game and there would be 15 of us, not one or two guys like you see today and we'd talk baseball.

The other reason was because we had fantastic pitching and defense; we'd do what we needed to do to win games. Al (Lopez) tailored everything to the pitchers, he'd play for one or two runs, we'd get them, and with that pitching we'd make it stand up.

**ML:** Mike when we talked to set this interview up you mentioned that you'd love to talk about the White Sox of the mid 1960's because you didn't think fans or the organization realizes how good those teams were. Why do you think those Sox teams haven't gotten a lot of respect, despite averaging 96 wins a season from 1963 through 1965?

**MH:** Well because we didn't win the pennant, we'd always come in second... but that doesn't mean we weren't a good team. We were some of the greatest teams the White Sox ever had. Everybody always talked about how poor we hit but remember this was an era of pitching. Against the quality of the pitchers that were around back then if you hit .260, .270, .280 you were doing well.

Our hitters don't get any credit because fans compare what we did to what they are doing today. You can't compare those two eras. And we played half of our games in Comiskey Park where it was 352 down the lines and 415 feet to center field. I'll give you an example... if Pete Ward played in Wrigley Field; he'd have hit 50 home runs a year. I saw how many of his drives to left center and right center were caught...in other ballparks, they'd be home runs. We had some good hitters on those clubs.

**ML:** Tell me about your manager, Al Lopez, the guy you had your first time with the Sox. What was he like as a manager and as a man?

**MH:** Whew...he was a different guy. I was close to Landis and Nellie Fox and we'd talk about Al. Both of those guys had issues with him. Al's attitude and personality were like night and day depending on if he was on the field, or if it was after the game. Off the field Al was absolutely the nicest guy in the world but once he put that uniform on he was tough and at times he was just nasty. He cussed me out unmercifully at times I know that.

That being said he was a brilliant manager. You learned how to play the game the right way under him. He had certain rules that you never broke. For example, you'd never get thrown out at third base with no out or one out in the inning. You learned to bunt, to hit the other way, to advance runners or you just didn't play

**ML:** In 1964 your individual numbers dropped off badly. You fell to .230 on the season in batting average for example. Was there an injury or was something else going on that hurt you?

**MH:** I did have some injury issues, I had a bad elbow that eventually needed surgery when I was with Kansas City but the biggest issue was Al (Lopez).

He told me I was so bad, so often, that I started to believe him. Al got to me. He was the type that would break you down mentally and you had to be able to handle it. Remember nothing really pleased Al on the field.

**ML:** As far as the team itself, the Sox were as good as they could have possibly been in 1964. They had 98 wins, finished the season with a nine game winning streak, had five pitchers with double figure wins, had a lights out bullpen...yet finished one game behind the Yankees. Tell me about the stretch drive in 1964. What was it like in the clubhouse knowing you were running out of time to catch New York?

**MH:** I remember that stretch run and I really thought we were going to win it. We had played the Yankees in a big four game series at Comiskey Park and we beat them badly.” Mickey Mantle was good friends with “Moose” Skowron, our first baseman, and I remember him coming up to “Moose” and telling him, “we can’t win this thing, so good luck. I hope you guys win it.

*(Author’s Note: The Sox lost 10 consecutive games to the Yankees that season before sweeping them in Chicago. The series was held from August 17 through August 20. The scores were 2-1, 4-3 in 10 innings, 4-2 and 5-0. The 4-3, 10 inning game was won when Hershberger laced a single to right scoring Al Weis.)*

Then we played the Orioles, the other contender in the race and they beat us, so basically we let the Yankees get back into the race.

*(Author’s Note: The Sox – Orioles series was right after the Yankee one from August 21 through August 23. Baltimore won three of four. The only Sox win came in the last game, the back half of a twin bill, 3-1 behind the pitching of Gary Peters. That series made the cover of “Sports Illustrated”, a rare black and white cover shot showing Brooks Robinson scoring a run in front of Sox catcher Gerry McNertney.)*

**ML:** Going into the final weekend the Yankees were playing Cleveland while the Sox had Kansas City. The Sox swept the Athletics, shutting them out the final two games, yet New York clinched the last Saturday. Do you remember how you felt when you got into the locker room, knowing it was all over?

**MH:** It was frustrating. A lot of us felt abused by Al (Lopez) and we were tired. We felt we earned the right to be there. We did what we needed to do, win games, 98 of them. Everybody who plays this game wants a ring and nobody cheers you for finishing second.

*(Author’s Note: Immediately after the Sox swept them, New York went on a run. They won 30 of the last 43 games, going 18-6 after September 10 including an 11 game winning streak from September 16 through September 26.)*

**ML:** That off season you and Jim Landis were part of a major three team deal with the A’s and Indians. The Sox would get in return Tommy John, Tommie Agee and Johnny Romano. Landis had some issues with management the final few seasons with the Sox, but why do you think you were included in the deal? And how did you react when you heard about it?

**MH:** Jimmy and I talked and we both agreed that there was no way the Sox were going to trade both of us but we were sure one of us was going to go. I remember when I got the call from Ed Short. I was building a house in Canton, Ohio when I took the call. He said he hated to trade me

but the Sox felt that if they could get Romano they'd win the pennant in 1965 and that their scouts said Agee was ready to take over in center field.

*(Author's Note: The Sox G.M.)*

*(Author's Note: The Sox would win 95 games in 1965, but finish seven games back of the Twins. Romano would hit .242 with 18 home runs and 48 RBI's. Agee would become American League Rookie of the Year in 1966 and John became an immediate contributor to the best starting rotation in the American League winning 14 games with a 3.09 ERA in 1965.)*

**ML:** You may have been gone from the Sox but in late September 1967 you witnessed first-hand one of the worst nights in franchise history as the A's dumped the Sox twice sending them on a death spiral with the pennant right in front of them. What do you remember about that night?

*(Author's Note: The Sox lost a double header to the A's on September 27 by the scores of 5-2 and 4-0 in front of less than six thousand fans in Kansas City. The two losses dropped the Sox from a half game behind Minnesota to a game and a half with three games remaining in the greatest pennant race in Major League history. Hershberger went 1 for 8 with a double and two runs scored that evening for the Athletics.)*

**MH:** That was one of the best memories I had in baseball. I was very bitter that the Sox traded me. The day before the two games, Joe Horlen and I drove to Wichita. Some radio stations wanted to interview Joe. We were friends when we played together and are still friends to this day. Anyway we're in the car and I turned to Joe and said, "Joe we've got two kids going tomorrow and we're going to kick your ass." And we did.

*(Author's Note: The two 'kids' were Chuck Dobson and Jim "Catfish" Hunter)*

**ML:** Did the Sox seem tight to you? Something was off that night... maybe it was the fact that with an off day and the rain out, which forced the doubleheader, the Sox hadn't played a game in over three days in the middle of a pennant race.

*(Author's Note: The Sox played a Sunday afternoon game in Cleveland which they won 3-1, then didn't play again until Wednesday night.)*

**MH:** I'm sure it would bother you a little bit, it would throw your timing off. Yes... you're used to playing every day by that point in the season.

**ML:** You went with the A's to Oakland then played the 1970 season in Milwaukee before you came back to the Sox organization. Tell me how they got you back.

**MH:** I had injuries when I was with Milwaukee. During the All-Star break I tore a groin muscle while I was water skiing. My ski went off to the right and I thought I was strong enough to pull it back to the center while I was in the water. Our manager Dave Bristol didn't like that and I was out two months, so at the end of the year they let me go. I was still young enough that I wanted

to keep playing and was invited to the Sox spring training in Sarasota, Florida. I had a good spring but hurt my hamstring and was sent to Tucson to get it healthy.

*(Author's Note: Tucson, Arizona was the Sox Triple-A affiliate.)*

**ML:** Chuck Tanner became your manager in 1971 when you returned to the South Side. Having seen the state of the franchise in 1968, 1969 and 1970 what did you think of him and for that matter Roland Hemond in turning things around?

**MH:** I thought both men had a lot to do with turning things around. They had good personalities, were class individuals and both had been around baseball for a long time. They knew the game.

**ML:** You got called back up to the Sox in early May of that year and Tanner went to the mat for you in the process. Apparently, Chuck threatened to quit if he wasn't allowed to bring you back up. At the time did you know about what was going on behind the scenes?

*(Author's Note: Chuck talked about this in my interview with him. Here's what he said: "The other thing that turned it around took place pretty early in the 1971 season. We weren't doing well; we were having a hard time catching the ball in the outfield. Mike Hershberger was back in Triple-A because he pulled a hamstring and I said I wanted him called back up to the Sox. I got a call from Roland (Hemond) the next day saying that there was a meeting going on at Comiskey Park and that a number of Sox people didn't want him to return. I said "I'll be right over"*

*"So I got to the park and went to the meeting. A number of Sox people were there, the farm director, the assistant farm director, scouts. Basically they said Hershberger had a bad attitude, he didn't want to play, a lot of stuff."*

*"So I said, and this was the greatest thing I ever did with the Sox, "you know there's a reason Don Gutteridge isn't here as manager anymore. It's because he listened to all of you!" I said "if Hershberger isn't brought back up, you'll be looking for a new manager tonight." I threatened to resign. Mike helped turn it around. He hit a home run to win a game; he threw out a guy at the plate to win a game. He settled down the outfield and we started to win. The point was, I was going to win or lose the way I wanted to, not the way someone else wanted me to." In 74 games that season Hershberger hit .260, with two home runs, nine doubles, 15 RBI's and 30 walks in 177 at bats.)*

**MH:** No, I didn't know anything about it until about five years ago. I was speaking with Chuck and he told me everything that happened. Chuck gave me credit for helping him establish himself as a Major League manager. I asked him what he meant and then he told me about it. It was between me and Pat Kelly as far as who to call up. We both were playing really well at Tucson... most of the Sox front office wanted Pat, but Chuck wanted me.

**ML:** You were telling me that your season ended in a bizarre way. Will you repeat the story?

**MH:** The last game I ever played in the big leagues, I got three hits I was staying in a hotel in Chicago and that night about five or six in the morning, I woke up with severe pain in my back. I

took a hot bath which only made it worse. I said “I’ve got to get to a hospital” so I threw on some clothes and took the elevator downstairs to the lobby. The pain was so bad it dropped me to one knee in it. Ironically there were some Major League scouts in the elevator and they probably thought I was drunk from being out all night or something. I got in a cab and threw up outside the window on the way to the hospital. It turned out I had a kidney stone and it took four or five days before I passed it. I’d never had that kind of pain before.

Ironically when the Sox released me at the end of the season Roland (Hemond) told me the Yankees were interested in me and to call Lee McPhail. I took a few days to think about it. I had a young family, had played 10 years and didn’t know if I wanted to play anymore. Finally I decided I still wanted to play and called after checking with Thurman Munson, he lived in Canton. What happened though was that while I was thinking it over, New York signed Johnny Callison and Ralph Houk didn’t want to have two veterans fighting for that one position. I respected the Yankees telling me that when I called them, so that ended it for me.

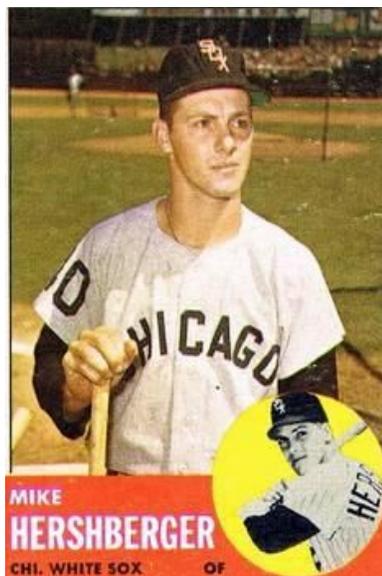
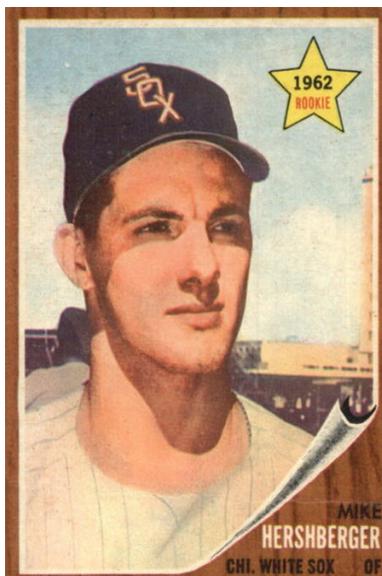
*(Author’s Note: Then Yankee G.M.)*

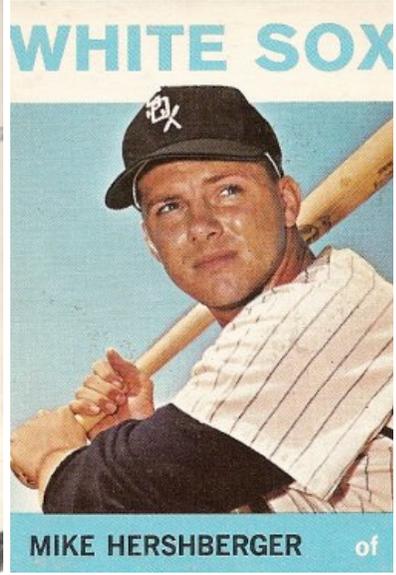
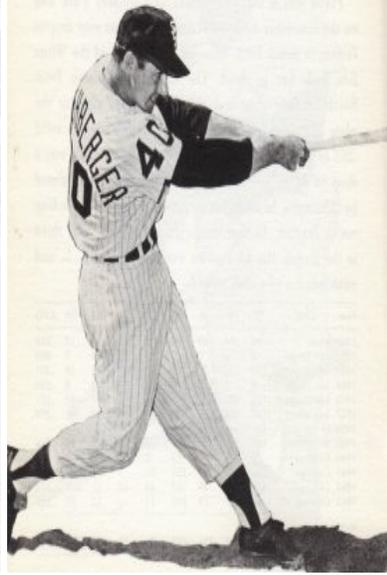
*(Author’s Note: Then Yankee manager)*

*(Author’s Note: September 17, 1971 in a 9-4 win over the Angels)*

**ML:** Basically, you spent four years with the White Sox overall, sum up your time with the organization for me.

**MH:** I really enjoyed the fact that I played with some of the greatest players in the game when I was with the Sox. They taught me how to play and how to win at the big league level. Chicago was also a great town to play in, I don’t care what sport you played, they knew you in Chicago.





WHITE SOX

MIKE HERSBERGER of