

Ron Kittle

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2003.
Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2003.*

His trademarks were long distance home runs and a slightly different view of the world and life, as a Major League player. Both of those traits helped make Ron Kittle the 1983 American League Rookie of the Year and the "pseudo" Mayor of the city of Chicago.

Fans loved Kittle's long distance calls to the distant regions of Comiskey Park but also appreciated his down to earth sensibility and the lack of ego that seemed to infect many other ballplayers. Then and now Ron is still remembered for such memorable lines as...

** When asked if the first person to hit a ball clear out of Comiskey Park would be him, Greg Luzinski or Harold Baines, Kittle replied..."The way he's hitting the ball now it'll be Julio Cruz."*

** When asked what his biggest thrill in the Major Leagues was, he responded..."My first paycheck."*

** In the victorious Sox locker room after clinching the 1983 Western Division championship Kittle was being interviewed by Ken "Hawk" Harrelson when he commented "I need windshield wipers for my glasses the way the champagne is being sprayed all over the place!"*

** When asked about fans reacting to his long home runs he said, "Fans appreciate home runs, I mean; they don't stand up for singles..."*

** After breaking the Sox record for most home runs by a rookie, Kittle was told by the media the record was held by Zeke Bonura. In response Ron said (with a straight face) "Oh yea, Zeke...he was my hero..."*

Kittle enjoyed a successful 10-year career in the big leagues with four teams. Ron had three tours with the Sox, playing with them from 1982 through 1986, 1989 through late July 1990 and finally for a short time in 1991. He also played with the Yankees, Indians and Orioles. Ron still considers the Chicago area home where he devotes time to his family, his charitable endeavors and his business interests.

I caught up with "Kitty" at his Indiana home where we discussed his comeback from an injury that almost ended his baseball career before it even started, how a player can actually hit a rooftop home run, the 1983 A.L.C.S. where Kittle getting hit on the knee almost started a brawl on the field, the 1990 season that saw the Sox shock the baseball world with 94 wins, and how good a hitter hockey Hall of Famer, Wayne Gretzky really was.

ML: Tell me about growing up in Gary and how you got started in baseball Ron.

RK: My dad was a steelworker and he helped build a youth baseball stadium across the street from where we lived. It was all done in steel, real nice and it's still there. Because it was right across the street I was always spending time there, I was a bat boy like when I was five. As I got older I just started playing, usually against kids who were older than I was. Guys would hit shots and I'd just stand there and let them bounce off me, smother them and make the play. I mean I'd get hit in the head and not back off, I just wanted to play. I'd play everywhere, it didn't matter what position I was at.

I only pitched one time though and that was because of my doing. My dad was working and was going to miss the early part of our game; he was the manager and gave me the lineup card to present to the umps. Well I sort of changed a few things to where I was batting leadoff and pitching! I remember my dad showing up in his work clothes, and it was like 6-0 against us in the first inning, the bases were loaded, and I just hit my best friend right in the back. He told me to get off the mound and go back to the outfield, and then he thought about it and said I should go to the outfield only to stand on the *other* side of the fence! He tossed me from the game, and that's the only time I ever tried pitching! I was 13 at the time. (laughing)

ML: You signed with the Dodgers and had a serious injury that almost ended your career before it even got started. What happened?

RK: When I graduated from high school my dad presented me with an ironworkers apprentice union card and I started working with him. I actually turned down some basketball and football scholarship offers because I just didn't want to go to school anymore. I wasn't a bad student; I just wanted to give up the books for the time being. One day my dad and I were getting ready to go to work on a Saturday which was double time. I was going to work like 16 hours so that was worth a lot of money. I was cleaning my boots and happened to see a story in the paper saying that the Dodgers were holding a tryout camp in LaPorte, Indiana. I quickly put my boots over it so dad wouldn't see it but he was already ahead of me. He knew about it and suggested that I go try out. I said I didn't want to because it would cost me a lot of money. Dad said if I went and did well he'd pay me the money that I was losing by not going to work. I went and had a great day. They asked me and two other guys to stay for some extra work.

On July 4 of that year (1976) I was home watching John Candelaria no-hit the Dodgers on TV when some Dodger scouts showed up. I signed with them for five thousand dollars and went to Clinton, Iowa to play. In my first game, in my first at bat, I doubled. Mike Scioscia (*Author's Note: Former Dodgers catcher and now manager of the Angels*) followed me with a single and as I was sliding home the catcher fell on me. It turned out that his fall broke my neck, but I didn't know it at the time. I was partially paralyzed right after it, I couldn't lift my arm or anything, but I thought it was like a stinger that you get playing football. I sat out for a while and tried to come back but just wasn't feeling right.

The Dodgers asked if I'd like to go to their team in Canada in the Pioneer League and keep playing. I was trying to build myself back up, remember I still didn't know how bad I was hurt, and I wanted to play, so I went. After another bad year where I just hurt all the time, the Dodgers

released me. I wound up going to some specialists in Chicago and they found that I had three crushed vertebrae and a cracked spinal cord. They were amazed that I even tried to play.

They couldn't believe I was even walking. I had the discs fused and was put in that halo device to stabilize my spine. The doctors told me I'd never play any type of sports again. That irritated me because I wanted to play. Before the injury I was a switch hitter with power from both sides of the plate. After the operation I had to give up hitting from the left side because I couldn't turn my neck as far around anymore.

ML: So how did you get back into baseball and with the White Sox? Also, is it true that Billy Pierce (*Author's Note: Former White Sox pitcher*) saw you play and recommended you to Bill Veeck?

RK: I wasn't going to quit. It took me about a year and a half to build my body back up, I was working as an ironworker and that helped get me in shape. I was up to about 240 pounds at the time. I started playing for a local semipro team in the area. In one game I hit a ball on to interstate I-294, and they said it took a shot about 550 feet to do that. That was with a wooden bat mind you. Supposedly Billy was at that game although I don't recall seeing him there.

In the fall of 1978 I was invited to try out at Comiskey Park. I remember the Royals were in town. "Minnie" Minoso started things by hitting some balls to me in the outfield. The first one he hit I never saw, it was about five o'clock, the worst time for the sun and it went right past my face. I still don't know how it didn't hit me. I showed them I could catch and threw one ball from right center field *into* the stands, so they saw I could throw. Then I grabbed a Wayne Nordhagen bat and stepped in to hit. Bruce Dal Canton was pitching. I hadn't even swung a bat for a few weeks and I completely missed the first swing. Ron Blomberg was watching me and he said "take your time son and relax." I wound up hitting 12 balls for home runs including one that went out of the stadium through those open arch windows that they had in the lower deck. The last ball I hit was on the roof. By the time I was finished guys from both teams were lined up watching. I was told that Bill Veeck said that I wasn't to be allowed to leave until I was signed.

ML: You rose through the Sox farm system and hit 90 home runs in two years, 1981 and 1982 combined. 50 of those were in one season at Edmonton. I remember reading that some folks dismissed what you did because Edmonton was a hitter's park with bad pitching, still that's a lot of home runs!

RK: I took pride in my hitting not only for power but for average. Remember I was still getting my body back. Yes... I heard that talk about how it was a small park, light air and so on. What I told the media was true though, "if it's so easy, how come nobody else did it?"

ML: You finally came up to the Sox in September 1982 and got 29 at bats. What was the biggest adjustment for you as compared to the minor leagues?

RK: The biggest difference was the defensive play. It was awesome. In the minor leagues I hit balls hard all the time and they weren't being caught. I hit a ball one time and broke a guy's ankle. Here in the majors, I'd hit shots and they'd be caught. It was a slow start for me. Charlie

Lau (*Author's Note: White Sox hitting coach*) told me to just hit the ball hard and to remember that home run hitters drive Cadillacs.

ML: On opening night 1983 I drove from Louisiana to Dallas to see the series the Sox played against Texas. I remember talking with pitching coach Dave Duncan about the fact that the Sox were counting on you, Greg Walker and Scott Fletcher to produce. I mentioned that was pretty risky for a team expecting to have a good year, to have to count on three rookies. Duncan said the staff had a lot of confidence in you three and were sure you all would do well. How important was that trust to you since everybody knows managers who just had no confidence in young players?

RK: That was to us *very* important. I honestly thought I should have been with the Sox in 1982. I hit like 10 home runs in the spring and when I was sent back down, I was ticked. When I came up for good in 83', all the guys, from Tony LaRussa to coaches Dave Nelson and Ed Brinkman treated everyone the same. It didn't matter to them if you were a veteran or a rookie. We all felt comfortable. We also had a bunch of veteran guys like Jerry Koosman who went out of their way to help teach us. It was almost like some of the guys became coaches themselves.

ML: Speaking of Tony LaRussa, what kind of manager was he?

RK: I knew Tony from back in the minor leagues. He was a guy who was out to win all the time and he'd use every little advantage that he could to beat you. He was a straight shooter, smart, quick and he looked at every angle to try to pick up something. That season we knew that with him in the dugout and our starting pitching we were going to be in every game. And that's all you want is a chance to win every time you go out on the field.

ML: The 83' season started out so badly for the Sox, by mid-May they were seven games under and a lot of folks were calling for LaRussa's head. Was there a key moment that turned everything around for you guys?

RK: Remember nobody in the division played really well early. That gave us confidence. We knew that if we could put together a couple of win streaks we'd be fine. It started to change when Tony put Carlton Fisk in the #2 spot and our starting pitching started to come around. Both Carlton and Greg (Luzinski) started out slow... when they started to hit, along with myself, and Harold we started scoring some runs. The other important thing was that Tony wasn't complacent. He was charging ahead. If you notice as the season went on we started getting more and more aggressive especially running the bases. Winning like anything else is contagious. I remember getting up in the morning and driving a hundred miles an hour if I had to, from Gary to get to the ballpark, and I've got the tickets to prove it! It got to the point where every guy on the team was like that

ML: You got a lot of media attention in 1983 in part because you always seemed to have a great quote or two. Was humor your way of removing some of the pressure that you were under?

RK: Humor is something that always seemed to work best for me. That seemed to make some people mad but most thought that I was different in a young refreshing way. I just wanted to play, I loved it. I played every game like I wanted to win it by myself and I don't mean that in a selfish way. I didn't mind being put in a position where I had to come through with a big hit or something to win it. I played hard all the time and if I made a mistake, I'd work so that I wouldn't do it again.

ML: I've got to ask you, what's it like to hit a rooftop home run? You hit seven in your career which is the most by any player in the history of old Comiskey Park.

RK: Somebody told me that to reach the roof you had to hit a ball at least 550 feet, I don't know if that's true or not. I recently got a tape from the White Sox which has all of my rooftop home runs on it. When you hit a ball that good you actually don't feel it. I had a slight uppercut to my swing and if I made contact in just the right way the ball would go a long way. The hardest ball I ever hit was that roof top home run against the Red Sox.

(Author's Note: April 17, 1990 against Rob Murphy in a game the Sox would win 2-1 in extra innings on a single by Ozzie Guillen off of Lee Smith.)

All I remember is how cold it was that night; I must have been wearing two or three sweatshirts under my uniform. It was cold and rainy and when I hit the pitch I couldn't believe it went that far.

ML: In the 1983 A.L.C.S. the Sox were shut down by the Orioles pitching staff. I remember reading where Tony said that if he had to do it all over again, he wouldn't have asked some of the veteran players to speak at that pep rally the city had for you guys before you went off to Baltimore. Looking back, he felt that only added to the pressure you guys were under. Do you think that was a factor?

RK: No, I don't think that had anything to do with what happened. The guys who spoke, like Greg Luzinski were veterans. They were used to it. When you lose, everybody has an excuse. We were the best team on paper, but you have to give the Orioles credit, they beat us.

ML: Speaking of that playoff series, in Game #3 you got drilled on the leg by a pitch and a brawl almost ensued. I remember you had to be restrained from charging the mound and Tony LaRussa was about as mad as I've ever seen him. What happened, and do you think you got hit on purpose?

RK: What happened was that Mike Flanagan hit me right square on the kneecap dislocating it. Yes, I think it was on purpose. Look at how often Flanagan hit anybody. He hit maybe one guy in two years; suddenly he just *happens* to hit me on a 3-0 pitch. I went after him and had to stop because honestly, I couldn't go any farther. I couldn't move because the knee immediately

started to swell up. Tony protected his players, he always stood up for them, that's why Rich (Dotson) threw at (Eddie) Murray and (Cal) Ripken. I played the next inning in the field but had to leave because the knee was just badly hurt.

(Author's Note: Kittle never appeared in the rest of the series. His loss in Game #4 was crucial because it took out a Sox home run threat. The Sox lost Game #4 3-0 in 10 innings. Kittle had the ability to end the game with one swing but he wasn't even able to pinch hit because of the injury.)

ML: The Sox were expected to go back to the playoffs in 1984. At the All-Star break they were leading the division having won seven in a row but fell apart in the second half and finished fifth in the division. What happened that season?

RK: I thought part of it was the players were so pleased about what happened last year, they relaxed. We had guys struggle that season including myself. I hurt my shoulder the first week slamming into the wall in left field at Comiskey Park in a game against the Tigers. That bothered me all season. Also, the team was different, Jerry (Koosman) had been traded and I think that really hurt the club.

(Author's Note: Koosman had been traded over the off season to the Phillies for relief pitcher and former NBA player Ron Reed.)

ML: After the 1983 season your home run totals declined the next three years. So did the number of games that you played. Was all that because of injuries?

RK: Injuries really did hurt me. I knew that because of my back I only had a certain number of swings that I was going to be able to get. 1983 was really the only year that I was even close to my best and even that year I think I was only about 75 per cent healthy. After that it seemed to get worse every year and it limited what I was going to be able to do. I'd have to take a Darvon before every game just to be able to play. Tom Paciorek looked at me one time and asked "how can you take that stuff? When I have to use it, it puts me to sleep." That's what I had to do just too even be able to go out there.

ML: Midway through the 1986 season the Sox traded you to the Yankees. I know that's part of the game but as somebody who grew up in the Chicago area that had to hurt didn't it?

RK: It hurt. And it hurt more because of the way that they did the deal. The trade was actually made during a game! I was in the field at the time and nobody bothered to tell me! I found out about it afterwards. I actually played about half the game even though I wasn't on the team. I was mad at the general manager, "Hawk" Harrelson because of the way he did it.

ML: After playing with the Yankees and Cleveland you returned to the Sox for most of 1990. Talk to me about that year where the Sox seemed to win games in the strangest ways...on a wild pitch, a hit batter, even getting no-hit but winning 4-0.

RK: What happened was that everybody saw every guy doing something to contribute. When that happens all the players say, "I have to help as well." Guys for example, saw how I was playing even though I had bad injuries. Rob Deer collided with me at first base a few years earlier and took out two more discs in my back. I played anyway; you had to kill me to take me out of the lineup. When you have a bunch of guys who try to help each other that's all you want to do is play, play and have fun.

ML: The Sox traded you in August 1990 to the Orioles for Phil Bradley and you weren't able to finish that outstanding year with the Sox. You came back *again* in 1991 but only played in 17 games before retiring. What finally caused you to have to leave baseball?

RK: I got traded in 1990 because I didn't get along with our General Manager, Larry Himes. I told him one time "you must have invented the pet rock," that's how smart I thought he was. He didn't like that and a few days later got rid of me. I came back in 91' and remember swinging at a pitch and then blacking out. I went to the doctor a few days later and he said that if I continued to try to play I was running the risk of being paralyzed. I wanted to be able to get around with my kids when I was 50 so I said that's it. I just physically couldn't do it anymore.

ML: Just wondering Ron why did you wear glasses instead of contacts when you played?

RK: I started out as a catcher and when I wore contacts, very often they would pop out. In those days the lenses were hard and wouldn't stay in. The lights also were different when I wore contacts. I saw better by wearing glasses.

ML: After you left baseball what did you decide to do for a living?

RK: I wanted to give something back to the area and the sport, so I started Indiana Sports Charities. We've raised over 1.5 million dollars for cancer charities. We do things like have celebrity softball games, and I have a large golf tournament every summer which brings back a lot of former Sox players. I'm proud of what we've been able to do because .98 cents out of every dollar goes to the organizations that need it. We don't have a lot of overhead taking away the money. I also have a bunch of speaking engagements and for a while I was a minor league manager. That didn't work out very well because the team basically was ready to fold. I took 25 thousand bucks out of my own money to keep the team going until the end of the season! Steve Trout (*Author's Note: Former Sox pitcher*) was my pitching coach.

ML: I also understand you're about to come out with your own line of clothing?

RK: That's right; it'll be a private line of clothing called "Mine." The reason for that name is that when I was growing up, my dad would write on my equipment "mine." I kept doing that when I played ball in the majors. I'd write it on my bats, caps, gloves whatever was mine.

(Author's Note: Those of you who have Bob Logan's book, "Miracle On 35th Street, Winnin' Ugly with the 1983 White Sox," should look on the back cover. Kittle and Logan are pictured. Look closely at the bottom knob of Ron's bat and you'll see the words "mine.")

We'll have golf shirts, cashmere sweaters, t-shirts... a full line of items. All the money raised will be going to charity. I'm in the process of constructing a web site for anybody interested in getting any of the clothing.

ML: Like Monty Python used to say, "And now for something completely different...." it's story time. How about a tale or two of some of the funny stuff that happened to you when you played?

RK: That's hard because every day that I played was fun. I remember there was a girl who kept telling me she needed a date when I played in left field. She'd flash me from the picnic area at old Comiskey Park. When I was in Cleveland playing with the Indians at old Municipal Stadium I'd fire a .22 caliber gun into the rafters to see how many pigeons I could get to fly out. I'd never shoot at the pigeons though. And I remember one time in 1985 we were in New York eating in Little Italy. I think there were about eight of us including Carlton Fisk and Tom Seaver. We're eating, and a guy comes to the table. I thought he'd ask Tom or Carlton for an autograph... instead he says, "Aren't you Herm Schneider?" Herm was out trainer! I guess Herm worked for the Yankees before coming to the Sox.

ML: Tell me about you pitching to Wayne Gretzky?

RK: Peter Pocklington owned both the Edmonton Triple-A franchise and the hockey team. Once or twice a week during the summer guys would come out to take batting practice. You know how it is in baseball; everybody's called by their first name or a nickname. Every week this guy named "Wayne," would come out and hit before our game. Nobody on our team knew who he was. I'd throw a lot of BP because I was a good batting practice pitcher, I'd throw strikes and I'd pitch to him. He was a good hitter! Later I found out that it was Wayne Gretzky! (laughing)

ML: Wrap things up for me Ron about your days with the White Sox.

RK: I enjoyed them. In fact, I'm still one of the biggest White Sox fans around. I want them to win more than they have been, and I've told Jerry [Reinsdorf] (*Author's Note: White Sox owner*) the same thing to his face. I tried to play the game right, to give the fans their money's worth. Now I try to do any good things that I can to set an example for kids.



