

## **Stan Bahnsen**

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

*He packed a lot of drama into a fairly short three and a half year stay on the South Side.*

*Stan Bahnsen was part of perhaps the single greatest trading day in franchise history. On December 2, 1971, then Sox Director of Player Personnel Roland Hemond got Dick Allen and Bahnsen approximately one hour apart and reshaped the entire 1972 season.*

*Bahnsen would promptly win 21 games teaming up with Wilbur Wood (24 wins) and Tom Bradley (15) to give the Sox one of the best rotations in baseball. Allen of course, would go on to win the A.L. M.V.P. Award and almost lead the Sox into the postseason.*

*In the words of his former manager Chuck Tanner, Stan was, “the best battler I ever had on the mound. He had no fear and went right after hitters regardless of who they were.”*

*In 1973, embroiled in a contract dispute and nearly released, Stan lost 21 decisions, including his last five in a row to close the year. His last win that year, was a near no-hitter in Cleveland, losing it with two out in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning. Earlier that season Stan pitched a complete game, 12 hit shutout at home against Oakland, testament to his “bulldog” attitude as well as pitching 13 innings in an eventual Sox win with the Indians.*

*In 1974 he almost tossed a perfect game against the Twins, lasting until two out in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning before allowing a hit.*

*He was traded in June 1975 but even then he helped the White Sox. As part of the deal with the A’s, Hemond got a promising future star, Chet Lemon.*

*Stan retired from the major leagues in 1982 but notice I didn’t say he retired from baseball. He continued to pitch in a senior professional league in Florida and then in his late 40’s pitched in Holland in their “major league.”*

*The former 1968 A.L. Rookie of the Year with the Yankees lives in Florida, where I caught up with him in early October.*

**ML:** Stan you were rookie of the year in 1968 and you seemed to have a bright future with the Yankees yet just three years later they trade you to the Sox for Rich McKinney, an infielder who never really made his mark with the club. Why do you think you got dealt?

**SB:** The Yankees needed a third baseman and Ralph Houk (*Author’s Note: Then Yankees manager*) loved him. Every time we played the Sox he seemed to hit a rocket or make a nice play in the field. The problem was though he never did much against everyone else. (*Author’s Note: McKinney had a lifetime average of .225*)

**ML:** How did you hear about the deal?

**SB:** Sportscaster Marv Albert called me at my office number that he had. It's funny, the Yankees didn't have that phone number and when the trade was made they couldn't get a hold of me! Albert had that number because often he'd call me and ask me to be on his radio show, especially if a trade had been made. He'd ask my opinion on it and such.

So Albert calls and asks "what did you think of the trade?" and I ask "what trade? Did I get traded?" Albert then suddenly realized that I didn't know about it and he starts apologizing, "Stan I'm sorry that I've got to be the one to tell you." (laughing)

It's funny because I remember shortly before the deal that Lee McPhail, the Yankees G.M. said that there were five guys that he wouldn't trade and I was one of them.

**ML:** At least the Sox looked like an up and coming club for 1972, they got you and Allen and had established players like Bill Melton, Carlos May and Wilbur Wood so I imagine from a baseball standpoint, there could have been worse places to get traded to.

**SB:** Well the Sox were certainly a better hitting team then when I was with the Yankees. I was shocked but I realized that it was just baseball, you play the game, and you might get traded.

I was actually happy to be going back to the Midwest. I'm from Iowa and it was always difficult for my family and friends to come to New York to watch me. This way they were a lot closer and could come more often. And New York was just a different type of place; I was more comfortable closer to home.

**ML:** What was your first reaction to meeting guys like Hemond, manager Chuck Tanner and pitching coach Johnny Sain?

**SB:** Those guys were three unique personalities. One of the first meetings that we had, Roland and Chuck talked about the idea of working on short rest, pitching every three days. Now we wouldn't do this all the time but there were parts of the season when they wanted us to do it. Wilbur of course with that knuckleball, would often go on two days' rest. I was like 'oh man...I don't know...' but I was willing to help the team. Chuck said that when we were doing this, he wasn't expecting a complete game or anything but wanted us to give him six or seven innings. I did it, but honestly I think it cost me a few years of playing down the road. Those extra starts, usually six or seven a season and the innings added up. (*Author's Note: Bahnsen averaged 250 innings and 39 starts in his three full seasons with the White Sox.*)

**ML:** Different teams have different philosophies, for want of a better word, when it comes to pitching. What did the Sox have you do differently from the Yankees, especially in that first spring training?

**SB:** Well Johnny Sain was great for me. He helped me improve my curve ball so much. I had a curve when I came to the Sox but John and I worked on it a lot and we were able to get it to break with better velocity.

Every pitching coach is different when it comes to what they want to do. John liked to have his pitchers throw every day even if it was just tossing on the side. I didn't have a problem doing that although when we were working on short rest, sometimes we didn't throw every single day.

**ML:** The memorable 1972 season started with the first labor impasse that led to a strike and forced a later start than normal, then you guys went through that agonizing sweep at Kansas City to start the year (*Author's Note: The Sox lost three straight one run games, two in extra innings*) but the team then got it going and they were especially tough at home (*Author's Note: 24-4 at Comiskey Park to open the season*) What was it about Comiskey Park that brought out the best in everyone?

**SB:** I think part of it was that we had a lot of day games back then. We'd have a Wednesday afternoon game (*Author's Note: Where Harry Caray would call the game from the center field bleachers surrounded by fans.*) and we'd usually play day games on Saturday and Sunday. I think Rush Street just got to a lot of visiting clubs! (laughing)

Also we were a confident team; we had real talent and a lot of it. Plus, we had a bunch of great guys on the team, people like Tony Muser who would keep the clubhouse loose and laughing. Pat Kelly was great to be around and Rich Morales. Even Dick (Allen) would be part of things.

**ML:** You got off to a little bit of a slow start but by June 22 you had reached 10 wins... was there an adjustment period for you? New teammates, new ballpark and such.

**SB:** Sure. Every organization is different. With the Yankees when I was pitching in Yankee Stadium, I'd always see lineups with at least eight left handed hitters, sometimes nine! They had that short porch and if you could swing a bat at all, and were left handed, then you'd be in the lineup against me. Teams would figure it was worth a chance with so many left handed hitters that someone might get one up in the air and into the bleachers in right field.

When I came to the White Sox I had to learn to pitch inside again to left handed hitters and that made me a better pitcher, I could use both halves of the plate now.

I also thought that White Sox fans were a lot warmer than Yankee fans and as far as the city of Chicago went, I loved it. For two years, I actually had an apartment downtown, that's how much I loved Chicago.

**ML:** 1972 was an amazing season, perhaps none better than by Dick Allen, what was he like as a teammate and as a ballplayer?

*(Author's Note: Allen would finish the 1972 season almost winning the Triple Crown. He led the league with 37 home runs, 113 RBI's, a .603 slugging percentage and 99 walks. He led the Sox with a .308 batting average, drove in 19 game winning runs, stole 19 bases, scored 90 runs and*

*(was only .0005 points shy of leading all A.L. first basemen in fielding. He was the leading vote getter for the All Star team and was awarded the league's M.V.P. award that November.)*

**SB:** I actually thought that Dick was better than his stats. Every time we needed a clutch hit, he got it. He got along great with his teammates and he was very knowledgeable about the game. He was the ultimate team guy.

The only folks who seemed to have some issues with Dick were the media. There were times when Dick wouldn't show up for batting practice and things like that and folks wondered, why? Well I asked Dick about that one time and he was right in his reasoning. Dick told me that when he was in a groove, when he was really seeing the ball well, he didn't want his timing disrupted by seeing 55 mile an hour batting practice pitches... it's not like you're going to see that in a game. When Dick was having trouble or wanted to work on something then he'd take BP.

And Dick wasn't the only guy who'd sometimes miss batting practice. (laughing)

I was the type of player who didn't like to show up six hours before game time. I didn't want to sit around the clubhouse, start reading the papers and finding out what the writers were saying. I liked to get to the park about an hour and a half ahead of time when I was pitching and Chuck (Tanner) didn't have a problem with it.

But this time it was in April when you had to change the clocks and I guess I got it wrong because instead of moving my clock forward, I set it back. So the next day I get up and I think I've got all this time. I go eat breakfast and I'm in the car when the radio says that it's actually two hours later than I thought! I would up getting to the park about 45 minutes before the game started! (laughing)

**ML:** As the season went on, the Sox cut an 8½ game Oakland lead down to basically nothing, when you went to the Coliseum that August, and this was without Bill Melton, lost in June to a herniated disc. How Stan did you keep yourself composed given the circumstances and what was at stake?

*(Author's Note: It may have been the best series in the entire decade for any team in baseball. The series began on a Thursday night with a game that wound up being suspended due to curfew tied at three after 17 innings. It was picked up on Friday and would go eventually go 19 innings before the Sox lost 5-3 on a two run home run from Joe Rudi. In the regularly scheduled game, Cub castoff Dave Lemons would out duel "Catfish" Hunter as he and Cy Acosta combined to hold the A's to two hits and win 1-0. Wilbur Wood then repeated the feat on Saturday with a two-hitter winning 3-1 in 11 innings, vaulting the Sox into first place. The Sunday game then saw Vida Blue shut out the Sox 3-0 for a split. Ironically Bahnsen took both losses in the series.)*

**SB:** I actually enjoyed those situations. I mean it was a lot better than going into August, 14 games out of first place.

As far as the crowd and the pressure...I don't know, when I was out there it was like I was watching everything that was happening, that I wasn't really involved in it. I never heard the

crowd, except maybe when I was involved in a play, like if a guy was trying to score at home on a passed ball, I'd hear the crowd noise start to rise. I just never really noticed them. You actually hear the crowd more when there were only a few thousand fans in the stands then when there were 30 thousand or so.

I was the type of player who'd almost get physically sick before the game. That's part of the reason why I didn't want to get there six hours ahead of time and have to start thinking about things. I was the same way as far back as high school. But once I threw my first pitch I was fine, I just concentrated on the game.

**ML:** On September 22 you got your 20<sup>th</sup> win, against Texas, at home. What did it feel like for you? (*Author's Note: Bahnsen went seven innings, allowing nine hits in the 8-4 win.*)

**SB:** It was very gratifying. I think I was like the fifth pitcher in the league that year to get 20 but back then we started more games so we had a better chance of hitting it. That's every pitcher's goal of course but as I think back, so much of your ability to get to 20 wins is based on how your team does.

**ML:** Stan you had a reputation as a pitcher who didn't nibble or play games with hitters, I guess Chuck Tanner said it best when he told me that he was never afraid to keep you out there because you'd never back down from a hitter. He said you were one tough guy. Was that just the way you pitched? (*Author's Note: The funny story about Stan was that he never really got into a game unless there were runners on first and third.*)

**SB:** That's a very nice compliment coming from Chuck. I appreciate him saying that. I didn't back down from a hitter, maybe that's why despite having guys on base, he left me in there to get a lot of innings pitched.

**ML:** As 1973 came around Bill Melton was back, the Sox acquired Ken Henderson and they were the consensus favorites. The club started out great, opening up a 3½ game lead by Memorial Day and was already 12 games over .500. Then it fell apart. Injuries killed the team but something else was going on behind the scenes regarding what then vice president Stu Holcomb was doing to guys who didn't have contracts and you were one of those guys.

**SB:** When I was traded to the Sox I went to see Stu about a new contract and we talked and he said that if in 1972 I had a good year, if the team had a good year and if the team was drawing, that he'd give me what I asked for.

Well in 1972 all of those things happened and in September I was sitting in the dugout at Comiskey Park when Stu walked by, sat down and we started talking. I mentioned to him the conversation we had and asked if he remembered it. Stu said he didn't. Then he added, "Well I don't think you're having that good of a season." I remember that night I beat the Angels, I think it was a shutout and I was mad just thinking about what he said to me. (*Author's Note: On September 8 in the first game of a DH, Stan beat the Angels in Chicago 5-1, going nine innings with seven strikeouts. He faced the Angels again on September 16 in Anaheim and won 2-0. Both times he out pitched Nolan Ryan.*)

So that winter when the Sox offer came, I never signed it. They only offered me five thousand dollars more after I won 21 games.

So in 1973 I was off to another pretty good start then that summer, it was in June I think, my dad had a stroke and I had to leave the club to go back to Omaha. I was able to get there before he passed away. So I rejoin the team and Stu wants to see me. I meet with him and he offers the same five-thousand-dollar raise that he did over the winter. I think the timing was deliberate, that Stu was trying to take advantage of the difficult time I had just been through. I didn't sign it and walked out.

That was it for me as far as I was concerned. I met with Chuck and Roland and said, "That's it, I quit. It's nothing against you guys but I've had it with him." I drove home... my wife was in Chicago at the time and told her what happened, and naturally she was concerned. She asked what was I going to do and I said I didn't care, they could trade me. Well I don't know what happened after I left my meeting with Chuck and Roland but the next day I got a call and the Sox offered me a deal for what I originally asked for. So I signed it.

**ML:** Roland Hemond told me that Holcomb ordered him to just release any player who wouldn't take the Sox contract offer and guys like Mike Andrews, Jay Johnstone, Rick Reichardt and Ed Spiezio, quality veteran players were just thrown away, the Sox didn't even attempt to get something back in trade. When the injuries hit that season there was simply no depth.

**SB:** Well nobody on the team respected Stu Holcomb. He wasn't a baseball guy. I remember one time I was in arbitration and he said "well you won five games against Texas." I answered "last I looked Texas was in the American League.

*(Author's Note: According to Hemond, Holcomb ordered him to release Bahnsen after he refused to sign the Sox offer. That was the breaking point as both Hemond and Chuck Tanner went to owner John Allyn and basically said if this policy continued they were both going to resign. Allyn then cashiered Holcomb.)*

**ML:** Back to the field in 1973 and you had two pretty interesting games that season. The first happened on June 21 in Chicago against the A's. You fired a complete game, 12 hit shutout! And you walked a guy. *(Author's Note: The Sox won it 2-0 and they only executed one double play, although three A's were thrown out on the bases).* Talk to me about that remarkable Thursday night.

**SB:** I remember the A's had a couple guys thrown out on the bases which made up for the lack of regular double plays. I also remember A's manager Dick Williams going crazy in their dugout because they had so many hits but couldn't score any runs.

I honestly didn't realize at the time that I gave up so many hits. I'd just go back to the dugout realizing they didn't score and start getting ready for the next inning. That's the way the game is sometimes, that's also when some started calling me "Stanley Struggle" because of the number of guys that would get on base against me.

**ML:** Then on August 21, 1973 at Cleveland you came within a few feet of a no-hitter. I have the audio of the last of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning and I'd like to know what goes through a pitcher's mind when he in the process of doing this, then what were you feeling when you lost out on it. (*Author's Note: The Sox won the game 4-0 but Bahnsen lost the no-hitter when with two out, ex-White Sox outfielder Walt Williams rolled a ground ball just to the left of Bill Melton on a 2-1 count.*)

**SB:** Well I knew what was happening, that they hadn't gotten any hits off me. That night I was warming up in the bullpen and just wasn't feeling good, my stuff wasn't working and I remember thinking 'oh, no...' because Cleveland had knocked me out the week before in Chicago. But when the game started it was one of those nights where if I'd miss on a pitch, they'd pop it up or hit it right at somebody.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> inning, I knew that Bill (Melton) wanted to play in on the grass in case Walt Williams was going to try to bunt for a hit. I threw a breaking ball and he got on top of it and I thought I had it. He hit a two bouncer that I was sure Bill was going to get to but with him playing in, it got past him. I really wanted it, and naturally I was disappointed when it didn't happen.

A few years ago I saw Walt at a BAT convention and he told me something I didn't know, that when he got to his car after the game, the fans had trashed it! They dumped garbage on it and everything. I guess they wanted to see me get the no-hitter too.

**ML:** All in all, 1973 was a major disappointment for everyone... in 1974 the team struggled and could only finish at .500 and in 1975 things were even worse although you weren't around for the last three months. How could something so promising in 1971 and 1972 go so wrong? Sure injuries were a part of it but there seemed to be more to it than that.

**SB:** Well part of it was the money issue with the team. I saw what Charlie Finley did with the A's in that same time period. He'd go out and get a guy, even if it was only for a month or two. If he needed another left handed hitter or a right handed relief guy, he'd go out and get it done. With the Sox, they'd never go out and get us the help we needed I guess, because they couldn't afford it. We'd only get a couple of kids called up to the team in September from the minor leagues. I know a lot of the guys felt that management wasn't doing everything we thought they should be doing to help us win. That attitude doesn't bode well when you have to come to the park every day to try to win a game.

**ML:** One highlight for you though in 1974 was on May 15 at Comiskey Park. Against the Twins you retired the first 23 in a row and were working on a perfect game before you settled for a two-hitter and a 1-0 win. (*Author's Note: Bobby Darwin broke up things with a hit.*) Given what happened in Cleveland were you aware of what was going on?

**SB:** Oh sure, like with the no-hitter, I knew I was throwing a perfect game.

What I really remember though was Bobby's hit and what happened as he was running the bases! When he first hit the ball, I thought it was gone... he hit a rocket. But it bounced off the wall and I saw that he missed first base as he was running! His teammates must have noticed it to because they started yelling and he had to stop and return to first base. We almost got him there on the

relay throw back to the infield. I've always thought how bizarre it would have been if we were able to throw him out and then I got them out in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning for the perfect game... what a way to get it! (*Author's Note: Stan's correct. Had Darwin been thrown out going back to first base, officially his "hit" would have never occurred and he would never have reached base due to the out. It would in fact, have been considered a perfect game and of course, a no-hitter!*)

**ML:** Normally I'd wrap things up Stan but I've got to ask you, after you left Major League baseball you played professionally in a senior pro league in Florida and then at age 48 played in Holland. That's pretty remarkable, so I ask why did you do it.

**SB:** The Florida Senior League had some team's right around where I lived in the Pompano Beach area. One team wanted me to pitch as a relief guy and I couldn't do that because I couldn't always make all the games, I was working as well. But the other team, managed by Earl Weaver, said that they'd just use me as a starter on the weekends and that was fine. I just wanted to keep playing...when I retired from the Phillies in 1982 it wasn't because I couldn't pitch, my arm was fine. It was that my legs were shot, I was having all kinds of trouble with them.

The Holland opportunity came about because I was having some personal issues at the time, I was going through a divorce and a friend told me about the fact that they have a league there and I might enjoy playing again. The owner actually came over to watch me throw at a high school field. My catcher was a kid about 19 and after I threw he asked him how I looked. The kid said something like, "he's real good, he can still bring it." (laughing)

So I went over there and really enjoyed it. They only play twice a week so there was time to sightsee in the area. I met friends there and we went to the areas where my ancestors came from. It was just a good experience. And I could still play; the scouts had me at 85 on the radar gun. I was still keeping my arm in shape; I'd throw 100 baseballs a week against a brick wall.

**ML:** So what are you up to now in Florida?

**SB:** I'm in the promotional business. For 20 years I worked with Norwegian Cruise Lines, now I'm in my fifth year working for MSC Cruises.

We do five cruises a year to the Caribbean, one a month from December through April. What I do is line up former major league players to go on them and participate and interact with the passengers.

It's a great time for baseball fans because I always try to get players from different eras and from different teams so that every fan will have someone they can relate to.

I've had players like Bob Feller, Gorman Thomas, Andre Dawson, Vida Blue, Jeff Torborg, Rudy May, Tom Tresh, Mark Buehrle, "Minnie" Minoso, Ken Griffey Sr. and Gary Peters go on these in the past or they will be going on one this season.

As part of our package you get a private party with the players and an autograph session at no extra charge, unlike a lot of other tours. We also do things on board like have instructional clinics; baseball trivia with prizes, the players have a storytelling session and a Q&A with the fans. We try to get everyone involved and make sure everyone has a good time.

**ML:** Stan wrap up the time you spent with the White Sox for me.

**SB:** Mark I've always said my time with the White Sox, especially in 1972, was the best time I ever had in the Major Leagues. I liked the fans and really enjoyed playing in Chicago. The city was just great to be playing in.

