

Felix Mantilla August 28, 2001

Interviewed by Bill Stevens in Milwaukee, WI

Subjects covered:

Puerto Rican baseball  
Black players in the South--1950's  
In Jacksonville with Hank Aaron  
Harvey Haddix perfect game  
1959 Braves/Dodgers playoff  
1957 Braves  
1950's Milwaukee fans  
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Dick Stuart-fielding of  
Sam Jones double curve ball  
Dusty Boggess

WS: How was it growing up in Isabela (Puerto Rico)?

FM: I started playing with the police athletic league. And then there was a team of older guys. We called it class A ball in my home town. I played with them one year. From there I went to Arecibo, which was about 45 minutes from Isabela. That was AA (PR league). I played about two years before I joined the Puerto Rican National team. We played a series with Mexico and we won the whole thing. It was the only Puerto Rican team to *ever* win the whole thing. <sup>in 1951.</sup>

WS: Was there anybody else on that team who made it to the big leagues?

FM: A few guys played professional ball in the Puerto Rican league but none of them made it to the big leagues.

WS: What position did you play then?

FM: At that time I played third.

WS: You were always an infielder.

FM: I broke in with Evansville as a third baseman, but **Bob Coleman** told me he was going to try me at short.

WS: How big of a family did you come from?

FM: Two sisters and myself.

WS: What did your dad do?

FM: He used to drive a publico car--a cab driver.

WS: Did everyone in your town play baseball?

FM: At that time it seemed that everybody was. I started with the police athletic league when I was nine or ten.

WS: Did you play in high school too?

FM: That was almost the same thing. We used to play softball and baseball and I ran track. I ran the 100 meters.

WS: Did you have a favorite player or team when you were a kid?

FM: I had a couple of them. There was a guy named **Luis Marquez**.

WS: He used to play for the Braves.

FM: He also played for the Brewers. Then there was **Luis Olmo**.

WS: He was one of the first Puerto Rican players wasn't he?

FM: Yes. He and **Hiram Bithorn**. Hiram pitched for the Cubbies.

WS: Don't they have a baseball field named for him?

FM: Yes, in San Juan. That field has been there since 1964 or 1965. Luis Olmo has a park in the professional league named for him too.

WS: Is he still alive?

FM: Yes. I saw him the year before last. He's in his 80s and he looks<sup>ed</sup> good. The other thing he does now is play a lot of golf.

WS: Who signed you and how did that take place?

FM: I was playing with the Caguas team of the professional league. And the Caguas team sent me to (Myrtle Beach), South Carolina where the Boston Braves used to train. And Boston signed me and sent me to Evansville. From Evansville I went to Jacksonville.

WS: How old were you when you went to Evansville?

FM: 17.

WS: How did that feel to be a 17 year old kid, probably never been out of Puerto Rico?

FM: I remember about a month before I finished high school, the principal knew that I was going to the United States and he told me "Felix, you might have some problems when you get to the U.S." I couldn't figure out what kind of problems he was talking about. He said, "You are going to go from San Juan to Miami. Then from Miami to Myrtle Beach. Sometime if you ride a bus to avoid problems you have to sit in the back." So I asked why I had to sit in the back.

WS: This was all new to you.

FM: Right. We didn't have to go through that in Puerto Rico. He said "That's the way the law is there, in Florida and South Carolina. I told him I would try to follow what he was saying.

WS: He was trying to warn you but he couldn't prepare you for it could he?

FM: No. But it was a little easier for me coming from San Juan to Miami, I was with about ten Puerto Rican guys going to spring training. At the time we took the train from Florida to Myrtle Beach then we started seeing things we didn't see in Puerto Rico. We were suppose to go in certain cars. It was an adventure.

WS: Evansville was in Indiana, but that still was a southern town wasn't it?

FM: Yes it was. It was completely segregated at that time.

WS: How did you cope with that? Did you get angry? Did you tell yourself that's just the way it is or what?

FM: At that age you see things different, I didn't speak English too well. So when someone was calling me a name I didn't know what the hell they were talking about.

WS: Who was your first manager at Evansville?

FM: **Bob Coleman.** He was a great man.

WS: What did you like about him?

FM: He was the one I used to ride with in the station wagon. There was a guy named Vital. He was Mexican. He used to ride in the wagon because he could speak Spanish a little bit. Then there was Bob, the driver and his dogs, a couple of German Shepherds. We used to go to Terre Haute or Burlington. He liked me and I liked the guy. He gave me a chance to play.

WS: How much coaching did you get in those days?

FM: We used to get a lot of coaching, but it seems like in the newer days they don't get that--the fundamentals. It's obsolete. But we used to get it--sliding, running bases, everything. We didn't get that much teaching in Puerto Rico. We just played. But when we got to spring training, they used to tell you have breakfast at seven o'clock. At quarter to eight you were at the ballpark. Then you dressed. At 9:30 you were out there. There were four towers. The coaches used to watch from upstairs. Then you went to one, or two or three o'clock.

WS: What was the toughest thing for you to learn?

FM: It wasn't sliding. I knew how to slide. I think it was the rundown. In Puerto Rico we didn't care. You could take a half hour as long as you get the guy. But here, it was two or three throws. That was a little hard.

WS: You had a good year at Evansville. You hit .323, 23 doubles and stole 28 bases. Then you went to Jacksonville. That was a promotion for you.

FM: That was from B ball to A ball. I had heard I was supposed to go to AA ball to the Atlanta Crackers. I found out the reason they sent me to Jacksonville because Atlanta was so segregated and they didn't want me to have problems. I was a younger guy so they didn't want to rush me.

WS: So you went to spring training with the Braves or with Jacksonville?

FM: I went with the Brewers. (a AAA team)

WS: **Ben Gharity** was the manager there. Hank Aaron said he was the best manager he ever played for.

FM: He was a very good guy, a good guy and a good human being. He was kind of a nervous guy. I asked him about his nervous tick. He told me somewhere he had another team in B ball or whatever, when the team bus went over an embankment. A couple of people got killed. But from then on he had the nervous tick.

WS: Reading from a Sporting News article about Mantilla, **Hank Aaron** and **Horace Garner** in Jacksonville. "Aaron was shy, almost mute, but Mantilla was a flashy Puerto Rican who wore chartreuse pants and a zoot suite key chain that hung down to his ankles." Is that true?

FM: I don't remember, but I used to be kind of a flashy guy in those days. So I guess he was telling the truth.

WS: From the same article: Aaron, Mantilla and Garner used to live at a rooming house owned by the proprietor of Manuel's Tavern.

FM: He had a beautiful home a couple of blocks from the ballpark. The guy was Puerto Rican. I felt pretty comfortable there.

WS: Again from the same article: The three used to stay in crummy hotels or Y's that belonged to the skid row league.

FM: I remember we played in Montgomery, Alabama. We stayed in this so-called hotel. We stayed upstairs over a restaurant. They used to fry fish. We're talking about the summer time and the windows had to be opened. Lucky I like fish.

WS: Is that something you tell yourself "That's the way it is or what?"

FM: We didn't have any other choice. I remember that things were usually a little rough with the fans. They called us names or whatever. But they could call me anything but I didn't know what the hell they were talking about. But after the game Horace and Hank and I used to sit down and taught me some English. They started talking about the names we were being called and they asked me if I heard what we were being called. I told them I didn't understand and they told me that maybe that's why those people are getting pissed off at you.

In Jacksonville it was scary sometimes.

WS: Were there any times you were worried?

FM: I received a letter one time. The writing was pretty poor. I saw a word that said "Kill you". I took the letter to someone on the ball club. They called the FBI. And the FBI came to the house. I couldn't understand completely but one of the guys said they would be at the ballpark. We played, but I was worried because you don't know what kind of a guy this was.

WS: In '54 you went to Toledo.

FM: In '54 and '55. George Selkirk was the manager. **Burt Thiel** played with us. I was playing short then. I had two decent years. Hit in the .270s I guess. I was brought up in '56 I think it was. I started out in spring training with the Braves in Bradenton. I came up north with them. I stayed in the hotel downtown. I thought I had the team made. We played an exhibition game somewhere. And right after the game they told me there were sending me to Sacramento.

WS: Did they tell you were coming back?

FM: That was the understanding. Sacramento at that time was an open classification league.

WS: You were there for about a half a season. Then you got the call. Who told you were going up?

FM: It was the manager. I don't remember who that was. I joined the team in New York or Pittsburgh.

WS: Do you remember your first game?

FM: I came in for Roach. It wasn't that big of a deal. I knew the guys already.

WS: What was it like being in Milwaukee in those days?

FM: Everybody was talking about Milwaukee. I remember in spring training, Humberto Robinson said "When you get to that city you won't believe it." I didn't have any idea. I thought maybe it was like Puerto Rico where people get kind of goofy. But when I came here it was a different thing. When I was in the house I could hear at the back door someone was leaving some milk. They used to bring a gallon every day for free. There was beer out there. I don't know why when I don't drink beer. We used to get Wisco99 gas and a car from Rank and Son. I had never seen a place like this before.

And the fans. If you lost a game they didn't boo you. Coming from a Latin country, when you started losing games you had to watch your back.

WS: What was 1957 like?

FM: The park was crowded every day. It was a good feeling every time you went to the ballpark. With the fans behind you can't lose.

The Chicago fans are different. When I got released after my last year in Houston I wanted to play maybe one more year. Some people asked me why I didn't sign with some team in the American League. A couple of teams like Washington and Kansas City needed some help. But I wanted to play in Chicago. One, because of the fans and two, it was close to home. I was living in Milwaukee. So I signed with Chicago. It didn't go to well because I suffered an injury to my Achilles tendon. And that was it.

I didn't play that particular year ('67) and the following year they called back to see how my leg was. So I went with them again but I couldn't do anything. Maybe if I had suffered that injury today I would have been playing in two months.

WS: What about the disabled lists of today. Maybe there should have been more people on the DL in those days.

FM: Well, yes. In those days pitchers pitched nine innings. Otherwise you were a sissy. If you got hurt a couple of times they called you "tissue paper". You had to play with pain. In Puerto Rico there were a bunch of guys that knew that I played with a bad arm all my life--since 1952. I hurt my arm playing right field with Caguas. I never said anything. I used to watch **Don Zimmer** throw from short to first and he used to throw underhand. So I decided to try it because every time I tried to throw overhand my arm was hurting. So I tried it and my arm didn't hurt. I didn't have that much on the ball but I played the rest of my career that way, even the outfield.

If you're not playing regular and you tell someone your shoulder hurts they would ask how you hurt your shoulder when you're not playing. He must be "jaking" or something. The first thing you know you'll find yourself in triple-A.

WS: In 1957, the Dodgers gave you a fight all the way to the end. When Hank Aaron hit that home run, how did it feel?

FM: That was pandemonium. That's a great feeling. I played with some winning teams in the Puerto Rican league and that felt great too. The fans go berserk. But that didn't compare to '57. I guess Hank felt better than anybody.

WS: The game with Harvey Haddix. What were you guys thinking as the game was going on?

FM: He was throwing the ball pretty well. He used to keep it down and that night he was throwing very well. I remember about the 5th inning, some of the guys were coming in and saying "We're going to get him in the 6th." The 6th came and went. So then it was "He's not throwing so well now, we'll get him in the 7th." Well, the 7th went and the 8th went. Now you could see the eyeballs. I knew it was a perfect game. Then the 9th came and the 10th. The amazing thing is that **Burdette** was getting hit more freely and the game was still 0-0. I think **Burdette** pitched a 10 hitter or something.

WS: Then the last inning. Why were you in the game?

FM: I think I was in as a pinch runner or something. I hit a ground ball over third and **Hoak** hurried the throw and it was a low throw. Then **Mathews** bunted me over. Then **Aaron** was walked. **Joe Adcock** hit the ball between right and center. I was halfway between 2nd and 3rd.

WS: You weren't sure it was going out.

FM: Right. They used to have a wire fence and it was hard to tell whether he would catch it or not. So then I saw it went over. So I scored. All of a sudden I looked and here is **Hank** running past **Adcock**. We couldn't figure out what the hell was going on. I was waiting at the plate to shake hands with the guy who hit the home run and Hank was running and **Adcock** was running another way. This was fun but tragic. So the umpire

got into it. We're thinking maybe the score wouldn't count. So they figured it out. **Adcock** was out for passing **Hank**. The amazing thing was that **Hank** was walking near the mound. We told him to get back.

WS: Does it bug you sometimes that people only know you for that?

FM: A lot of people say to me "Remember in 1959 when you threw a ball to first base and you lost the game against the Dodgers. I came in with **Logan** got hit by **Norm Larker**. We were leading something like 5-1. But the Dodgers tied the game and it went to extra innings. I don't know if it was the 10th or 11th. **Bobby Avila** was at second and he was kind of slow at that stage of his career. So I told **Logan** I would shade over to right field. It was a bouncer over the pitchers mound almost behind the bag. So I went over and grabbed the ball. I made the throw to first but it was a low throw and (**Frank**) **Torre** couldn't come up with it.

I never felt bad about it. I remember flying back from Los Angeles to Milwaukee and **Red Schoendienst** can't in and said "You didn't lose the game. We should have won it earlier.)"

WS: Let's talk about the 1957 series. What was most memorable?

FM: The 7th game. We were playing at Yankee stadium. That's a tough park. It was double tough because we were playing the Yankees. It was a little scary. We played well the first 6-7 innings. Then we scored a few runs. [4 runs in the 3rd] We're leading by four. [note: Actually 5-0] They had two men on and I knocked the ball down for a base hit. Now they had the bases loaded. **Moose Skowron** was coming in. We were in trouble. He could hit to right fairly well, but he could pull the ball too. So if he hit it down the line or hit it out the game was tied. He hit a shot. **Mathews** made a hell of a catch and stepped on the bag and that was it.

This was the greatest feeling of all-time. I was playing second and the shadows at Yankee stadium made it tough to see. That made it an even greater play. When that ball left his bat I said "Oh no!". He backhanded it right on the line.

WS: Let's talk about 1958. Was winning in '58 the same as it was in '57?

FM: No, it was a little different. We clinched the pennant in Cincinnati. It wasn't the same with the guys.

WS: I think it was the same for the fans.

FM: I think so. Every year we had improved. We were 5th or 6th and ended up second. In '57 we won it. Then in '58 it was like we were suppose to win.



WS: In 1959 you played 103 games.

FM: I think that was because **Bruton** got hurt and I played the outfield.

WS: Things went down in '60.

FM: I think we were 8-10 games out.

WS: The famous 1962 Mets. How did all that come about?

FM: In '62 they were talking like I was going to be out of here. The Mets were starting and Houston. They took me in the draft. Spangler went to Houston.

WS: You were with the Braves your whole career. Was it time to move on or did it hurt?

FM: I didn't play that much in '61 and I knew the writing was on the wall. I knew I was going somewhere. When New York picked me I didn't know what to expect. I went to spring training with them. We did pretty decent in spring training, but when the season started, that's when the fun started. The fans at the Polo Grounds were great but we only won 40 games.

WS: How did the year go for you?

FM: I did fairly well. Richie Ashburn was the one. He hit over .300.

WS: How was it to play for the '62 Mets?

FM: I enjoyed it. It was tough losing every day, especially coming from a winning organization. But the other guys were going through the same thing. Hodges played with the Dodgers, all those guys.

WS: Then the Red Sox traded three guys for you.

FM: I knew I was gone because when you lose that many games somebody has to go. When I got to Boston I wasn't playing that much either.

WS: You were playing for Johnny Pesky then. What kind of a manager was he?

FM: He was a pretty good manager. But we didn't have the horses. The pitching staff that year consisted of Mombo and Dick Radtke. We were short of pitchers. We had a good hitting team. We had Yazstremski and Tillman, **Dick Stuart**.

WS: Was **Stuart** as bad a fielder as people said he was?

FM: Yes he was! He was a character. We were playing in Cleveland. Someone hit a ground ball to second. I fielded the ball. Now he's going back to first, but he's taking some time. I released the ball. By the time he turned around the ball got by him. He never saw it. So he looks at me and says "E4".

WS: Who was the best fielding first baseman you ever played with?

FM: **Vic Power**. I played with Vic about 13 straight years in the Puerto Rican league. This guy was great. I saw him about a year or so ago. I think he was scouting.

WS: Then came 1964. What the heck happened? The most home runs you had ever hit was 16 with Toledo. What was the magic?

FM: I guess--people used to say--some the managers--"we don't play Felix regularly because he gets tired. But then I went to New York and I played 141 games. So how come I'm not tired now? So when I went to Boston I played more. So I'm feeling good playing every day. You don't have to be looking to see who is going to pinch hit for you. When we used to play on a Saturday night and you go 0 for 4, and have a double header on Sunday, your name is going to be in the lineup regardless.

WS: How did you like Fenway?

FM: It was a great park to see the ball real well. Everything seemed like it was green. Killebrew really hit some shots there. Kaline loved to hit there.

WS: 30 home runs. That was a coming out year.

FM: It's one of those things I can't explain.

WS: The next year you were in 150 games, 18 homers, 92 rbi's.

FM: I enjoyed that year better than the one I had with 30 home runs because I drove in 92 runs. That was more than I drove in with the 30 home runs. That year I was hitting second, sometimes leadoff. Nobody was there in front of me. The next year ('65) I was hitting 3rd, 4th, 5th. With Yaz in there I was driving in more runs.

WS: What was your impression of **Tony Conigliaro**?

FM: He was a good hitter. He was a good outfielder too.

WS: That year the team was 62-100. Things didn't go well for the team.

FM: Attendance wise either. We had a bad pitching staff. We had Mombo (<sup>be</sup>Momobquette) and **Earl Wilson**. You knew those two guys were going to win. And we had Raditz.

**Dennis Bennett** had a bad arm.

WS: You had been around for a while by that time. Did losing get to you?

FM: People say if you are having a good season you forget about everything. But what about the guys who are not having good seasons? They have to be at the ballpark like everybody else. It's tough for those guys.

WS: Is it tough not to take it home with you when the season is going bad?

FM: Everybody handles it a little different. I remember **Dick Raditz** saying "That little white thing will make an alcoholic out of you if you let it."

WS: How did you end up in Houston in '66?

FM: I hurt my arm in the beginning of '66. I was playing with the Red Sox "B" team in spring training. I couldn't throw. My shoulder was hurting. I couldn't swing. The Red Sox decided it was time to unload me. They traded me to Houston. I didn't even know about it. When we got back after playing a game, Dennis asked me if I had heard you've been traded? So I went with Houston. I remember the following day Houston was playing the Braves. I looked at the lineup and here I am playing 3b and hitting 4th. I asked Grady Hatton, the manager, "Didn't Boston tell you I hurt my shoulder and can't swing?" I haven't had any real spring training. He said they hadn't told him.

WS: So the arm bothered you the whole season.

FM: I was on the DL for two months. Houston wanted me to stay with the organization. They had an A-1 organization at that time. I told them I wanted to play another one or two years. So I asked for my release so I could play somewhere else. And that's how I wound up in Chicago.

WS: I'm guessing that it's not the same playing when you are 30 as when you are 19.

FM: There were some games I played with Houston. I hit a ground ball between third and short off of Jim Bunning. Years before I could have beat it out but it seemed like it took a half hour to get to first. So I said maybe I was getting old.

WS: Was it hard to leave the game?

FM: I knew it was over because my leg was hurting and my shoulder was still hurting. People asked why I didn't go to Japan. I told them it was too far. I didn't want to go over there and get released. I would rather stay in the United States. So it wasn't that hard to leave.

WS: What did you do after?

FM: I went to Canada. About a year or two after. I went to the league and played the first few games but then my legs were hurting. Then the manager got fired. They made me the manager. We finished second. They wanted me to be a player/manager. I told them I could manage but I couldn't play any more. Because the roster was only 17 players they couldn't have me taking the spot of a guy who could play. So that was it.

WS: What did you do then?

FM: I came back to Milwaukee.

WS: Who were some of the easiest pitchers to hit off of?

FM: I used to hit **Luis Tiant** pretty well. He was a great pitcher. I wasn't playing regularly with the Braves so everybody was tough for me.

WS: Who were some of the tougher pitchers?

FM: **Gibson.**

WS: Was he as intimidating as everyone said he was?

FM: Yes. With a nasty slider. I told Hank, "Why don't you bring a chair to home plate because you're just going to be sitting there anyway."

Another guy that was tough was **Sam Jones**. He had the meanest curve ball of all time. **Blyleven** used to have a good one and **Jim Maloney** from Cincinnati. **Camilo Pascual** had a great one. But **Sam Jones** was the best.

WS: What tough about hitting a curve ball?

FM: Sam used to have a double curve ball. It seemed like it was going to hang but all of a sudden it would break.

WS: Where you a guess hitter?

FM: Everybody was a guess hitter. Whoever tells you they aren't was lying.

WS: I didn't realize earlier what a mind game it is.

FM: That's right. The pitcher has to guess too. A lot of times you see a guy going away, away and you know they're coming inside. But a lot of times they don't.

WS: What was the toughest park to hit in?

- FM: The Houston Astrodome. The ball just didn't seem to carry. You hit some shots there and they just die.
- WS: Did you have a favorite umpire?
- FM: **Dusty Boggess**. We were playing her in Milwaukee and he missed a play at second. So I told him "Dusty, what are you doing? They guy was out." He said "Felix, what do you want me to do, I missed the play." I just said OK.
- WS: Was there a big difference in the quality of umpires or were they all pretty good?
- FM: They were all pretty good. I think the ones now want confrontation.
- WS: Are you a baseball fan today?
- FM: I follow the teams that I played with.
- WS: What are some of the differences you see in the game today?
- FM: I think some of the guys are much stronger. But there were some great players at the time we played.
- WS: It sounds like you admired some of those guys almost like a fan.
- FM: I remember with **Hank**, he was suppose<sup>d</sup> to go to the Puerto Rican league with a team called ~~San Juan~~<sup>San Juan (sic?)</sup>. I told him I played with a different team--the Caguas team. I told him I wanted him to write a note that he would like to play with the Caguas team. I asked him who told him about ~~Centric~~<sup>Centric</sup>. He told me **Bus Clark**<sup>son</sup>. He was managing over there. He wrote to Caguas and they signed him. He won the batting title. And we won the championship of the league. Then we won the Caribbean series.
- WS: Did you play winter ball every year?
- FM: Yes.
- WS: Did you ever get thrown out of a game?
- FM: A couple of times, once by **Augie Donetelli**. I saw Aggie in an old timers game in Pittsburgh about 7-10 years ago. Aggie was there. I didn't know he lived around Pittsburgh. I think he died right after that.
- WS: If you had it to do all over again would you do anything different?
- FM: Not really. I had a pretty good life--a pretty good baseball life with all the years I played

in my home town, in the Puerto Rican leagues and in the United States. I enjoyed all of it.

WS: What did you do after you retired?

FM: I like to fish.

WS: What is the Felix Mantilla baseball league?

FM: It's on the south side <sup>of Milwaukee</sup>. It's been around about twenty some years. They even have t-ball now. They use my name. I went to see a couple of games this year and they're pretty good.

WS: Did you play center field when you played the outfield?

FM: With the Braves it was mostly center.

WS: Did you enjoy playing center?

FM: Yeah. I remember once when **Dennis Bennett** was pitching against the Yankees. They had Maris, Tresh, all those guys. Dennis had a bad arm. Every time I went to left-center they would hit to right-center. Every time I went to right-center, they would hit to left-center. I think they got 22 hits that day and that was just in the first game. I told the manager I wanted to go back to second.

WS: From what I've read, **Hank Aaron** wasn't the greatest second baseman in the world.

FM: He wasn't. When we were in Puerto Rico, [after Jacksonville] **Mickey Owen** was the manager of the Cuago team. He told Hank, "You are going to right". Hank was getting ready to be released because he didn't look too good fielding the ball and he wasn't hitting that well at the time. So I talked to one of the owners of the team and Mickey Owen sent him to right field. Mickey was the first guy to move him there. People were getting on his case about Hank.