

Pete Ward

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak on October 23, 2003.
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In his book "Who's On 3rd?" Sox author and historian Rich Lindberg uses the seemingly never ending quest for a capable third baseman as an example of how the Sox fortunes have gone up and down over the years. Third base seems to be the focal point of the long and winding road the Sox have trekked for a World Series title. Rich lists the starting third basemen from the start of the franchise to emphasize his point. Most of the names are very forgettable...Willie Kamm, Marv Owen, Floyd "the Blotter" Baker, Fred Hatfield, Bill Stein and Kevin Bell come to mind. But the Sox have occasionally been well represented at the hot corner. Who wouldn't take Robin Ventura, Eric Soderholm or Bill Melton for their team? But older Sox fans would also hand you another name for that short list of competent third sackers...Pete Ward.

Pete was acquired by the Sox from the Orioles in perhaps the most lopsided deal in team history. On January 14, 1963 Sox G.M. Ed Short sent Luis Aparicio and Al Smith to Baltimore for Ward, Ron Hansen, Hoyt Wilhelm and Dave Nicholson. Nicholson, despite the high number of strikeouts, would average in the 20's as far as home runs. Hansen held the Sox record for most home runs by a shortstop in a season until it was broken by Jose Valentin and he was among the top defensive shortstops in baseball. Wilhelm was incredible, racking up 41 wins and 98 saves in seven seasons with an astronomically low ERA considering he threw the knuckleball.

As for Ward... all he did was become Co-Rookie of the Year (with teammate Gary Peters) by hitting 22 home runs, driving in 84 RBI's, and hitting .295 In 1964 he produced similar numbers 23 homers, 94 RBI's and a .282 average. An auto accident shortened his career and hampered his production in future seasons but he still supplied badly needed pop in a Sox lineup that was lacking big bats until his trade to the Yankees after the 1969 season.

After baseball Ward became a coach and manager working in the Oriole, Yankee and White Sox organizations. He won the championship with the Ft. Lauderdale Yankees. After retiring from baseball he became a successful businessman opening his own travel agency Pete Ward Travel, in Lake Oswego, Oregon (a suburb of Portland.) which he still works at.

Ward talked with me from his home while watching Game #5 of the World Series. We talked about opening day 1963 when Ward's bat and glove beat the Tigers, about the pennant races in 1964 and 1967, about the accident which caused him problems for the rest of his career, about the "almost" cover shot of him on "Sports Illustrated", and about how the media treated the Sox in the early to mid 60's when the Cubs were regarded as an afterthought in Chicago.

ML: Pete before we get to your days specifically with the Sox, is it true that your dad played in the NHL?

PW: That's right. He was a winger for the Montreal Maroons in the NHL. He played from 1927 through 1940.

ML: How did you get involved in baseball instead of the national sport of Canada?

PW: We moved to Portland in 1945. Dad started coaching in the area. That's where I discovered baseball. My brother though was a very good player. For many years he held the scoring records at Michigan State. He played hockey there from 1951 through 1955.

ML: You came up with the Orioles and were a part of the big trade to the Sox before the 1963 season. How did you find out you were traded and what was your reaction to it?

PW: I got a phone call telling me about it. To be honest with you I didn't know much about the White Sox at the time. I was playing in the outfield at Triple-A. With Brooks Robinson at third base in Baltimore I knew I wasn't going to play there. The plan was to move "Boog" Powell from the outfield to first base and I was going to take over, hopefully, for him. The one thing about being traded though is that you know you are going to get a chance to play and you know that the team that traded for you wanted you.

ML: Did you have any idea that the Sox wanted you so badly? Charlie Metro, Sox super scout and coach, in his book, "Safe by a Mile," wrote that he insisted that you be part of the deal especially after working you out in Vancouver.

(Author's Note: From the Metro book pages 284 - 285: "I insisted on Pete Ward coming over to the White Sox in a deal with Baltimore because I had worked with Pete out in Vancouver. He was a pretty good hitter. He was very aggressive. He loved to play, quite a cocky kid. When the White Sox had a chance to make the trade, I said, 'Make them throw Pete Ward in the deal. He can play, he can hit.' Al Lopez said, 'Well, what kind of fielder is he?' I said, 'Well, he's not too good a fielder, but if you hit him a thousand ground balls at third base, he'll do pretty fair. But he can hit, and he can drive in runs and has some power. Don't make the deal unless you get Pete Ward.")

PW: Charlie had known me for a few years. I was in spring training in 1958 and got to know him. I played for him for a short period that year in Vancouver. It was nice that he thought so much about me.

ML: Shortly before the 1963 season opened, on April 8 to be specific, the White Sox had an intersquad scrimmage matching two pitchers who were bonus babies. At the time baseball rules stated a club could only keep one, the other would have to be released. The two pitchers were Bruce Howard and Denny McLain. Howard won 2-1 and got a ticket to Lynchburg Double-A, McClain was let go. Do you remember anything about that game and how big a mistake was letting Denny go?

PW: At that time both were equal in ability. Bruce was a good looking young pitcher; Denny had the stuff but didn't show it at the time. He was a fun guy to be around but nobody expected him to turn into the pitcher that he did. It was a tough decision.

ML: After a fine spring training you were named the opening day third baseman and had a sensational start. Against the Tigers that day you blasted a three-run home run that put the Sox in

the lead, off Jim Bunning, and you made a great play on a slowly hit ground ball by Al Kaline. I know it's been 40 years, but do you remember anything about how you felt that day? Were you nervous, excited, confident?

PW: I could probably tell you everything about that day, what happened at the game and what I did after the game... that will always stay with me. The ball I hit off Bunning came in the 7th inning and was one of the hardest balls that I ever hit. The ball Kaline hit was a topped ball that I had to charge. I remember after the game Ron Hansen, who was my roommate, and I walked back to the hotel where we were staying. That was a special day. You asked how I felt that day. I was very confident because remember I had been playing in the minor leagues and had been moving up slowly over four years. I felt that I belonged.

ML: Another big story that season took place in Washington D.C. on July 29. Joe Horlen was nursing a 1-0 lead in the last of the 9th and trying to protect a no-hitter. Not only did Horlen lose the no-hitter but he lost the game as well 2-1. Tell me what you remember from that night.

PW: Do you want me to tell you how he lost the no-hitter? Chuck Hinton hit a little bleeder up the middle, and then Don Lock hit a two-run home run. That was unbelievable. In a few minutes Joe lost everything, the no-hitter, the shutout and the ball game!

ML: You had another outstanding season in 1964 increasing your RBI's and almost equaling your home runs from the previous year. Everyone talks about what it's like getting to the big leagues for the first season but is there another jump that players make in the second? Perhaps by being more comfortable?

PK: Those two seasons and the last year that I had in Rochester Triple-A, I was very consistent. My home runs, doubles, RBI's, hits were all almost exactly the same. Al Lopez* was a guy who was great for your confidence. The first month of the 63' season the only game that I really hit was that opening day in Detroit. It really started to bother me. The Sox had another third baseman named Charlie Smith and I was concerned that if I didn't start hitting I was going to lose my job to him. Lopez saw this and called me in to his office one day, sat me down and told me to relax, that I wouldn't be here if I couldn't do the job and that I should keep swinging because the hits would start to fall in. He was right, I relaxed and started to hit again.

*(*Author's Note: White Sox manager)*

ML: The Sox that year had brilliant pitching, timely hitting and outstanding defense and almost won the pennant finishing a game back of New York. You guys won your last nine in a row to close the season under a tremendous amount of pressure. How confident was that club? Did you really expect to catch the Yanks at the end and at least force a playoff?

PW: We felt that we were going to win it. We were right there to the end. We certainly had respect for the Yankees who had great players, but we thought we could play as well. It was a lot of fun going out to the ballpark every day under those circumstances. You mentioned pressure but remember that to us, we had played under pressure all our lives just to get to the Major

Leagues. We had pressure in high school, pressure at the minor league level. When we wound up a game short that really hurt.

ML: In April 1965 season you were involved in an accident that really changed your career. What happened that day and what did you hurt?

PW: We were in Washington and got rained out so the team headed back to Chicago. I was able to get some tickets for the Blackhawks / Montreal Stanley Cup game so Tommy John, I and some other friends went to the Chicago Stadium. Afterwards as we were leaving, I was in the front seat on the right side and Tommy was in the back seat on the left when a car rear-ended us. At the time I didn't think that much about it, it wasn't really that hard of a hit but the next day I woke up with a stiff neck and was sore all over. I went to see a doctor and he told me I had a case of whiplash and it bothered me the rest of the year. It just caused a lot of problems for me. Tommy also had neck problems.

(Author's Note: Ward was reluctant to discuss this chapter of his career, not because he didn't want to talk about it but because he was concerned that readers might think he was using the accident as an excuse. I assured Pete that this story would not be written in such a way as to give that impression. In a short interview with "Sports Illustrated" the story quoted Pete as saying about the accident, "I was never comfortable from that point on.")

ML: Tell me about the "Sports Illustrated" cover that never was in June 1965.

(Author's Note: The June 7, 1965 cover of "Sports Illustrated" was originally supposed to show a shot of Pete swinging some bats in the on deck circle walking towards home plate with the caption 'The New White Sox Power For A Pennant' The cover shot had been planned well in advance. However, the Tuesday before the issue came out Muhammad Ali knocked out "Sonny" Liston in the first round of their fight in Bangor, Maine and SI at the last minute changed the cover to one of Ali / Liston with the caption 'The Fight You Didn't See.')

PW: I was supposed to be on the cover but after Ali won his fight they changed it. They just got the pictures there in time to do it. "Sports Illustrated" did send me some of the covers that were supposed to have me on it though. I have one in my office. Another one I signed and gave to Art Berke

(Author's Note: Berke is the vice president of communications for "Sports Illustrated" and is a die-hard White Sox fan. That signed cover now hangs in Berke's office in New York City. Ward also was kind enough to send me one which was a total surprise)

ML: Controversy hit the White Sox later that season when they were accused of freezing baseballs. I asked J.C. Martin* this question, now allow me to ask you it. Were the baseballs frozen?

*(*Author's Note: White Sox catcher)*

PW: I don't know. I know the balls that year were heavier than I can ever remember. Combine that with a wet infield and heavy thick grass and it was tough to get a ball out of the infield on the ground. This came out after we played a series with Detroit; we scored combined like 20 runs in five games after playing there a week earlier and scoring a bunch of runs.

ML: Al Lopez left after the 1965 season replaced by Eddie Stanky. Talk to me about those two men as managers as well as individuals.

PW: Eddie knew baseball, if anything he tended to over-manage. Eddie also spoke his mind which sometimes got the players on the other team pretty angry. When Eddie did something like that it pumped the other team up and they tried even harder to beat us. When Eddie was fired I felt as bad as anybody. I liked Eddie and I always thought that when a manager got fired it was kind of a shot at the players, if they were doing their jobs he wouldn't have been let go.

I preferred Al though as a manager. He was a great guy, got along with players. People think all Al did was give you the bats and balls and say 'go play.' That's not the case. He knew baseball and knew the way it was supposed to be played. I still remember when he got on me one day but a few hours later everything was fine.

ML: After 1965 instead of just playing third base, you spent a number of games in the outfield or at first base. Why did you suddenly start playing other positions?

PW: We had some good players on the club or coming up, guys like Don Buford, and they needed to find them a place. I preferred third base because I was a bad outfielder! (laughing)

ML: 1967 was another year like 1964. The Sox had tremendous pitching and defense but the hitters really struggled. How did you guys stay in the race with Boston, Minnesota and Detroit?

PW: It was because of Eddie Stanky, he kept us in the hunt. The other reason was because the ballplayers genuinely like each other, we liked spending time together. We had everything going our way until that double header in Kansas City.

ML: Let's talk about that series and final week. It looked like the Sox were series bound. NBC-TV started setting up cameras in Comiskey Park because the club finished with two games at Kansas City and three with Washington. Yet it all fell apart, starting with the A's winning both games of a double header. You were quoted as saying "how could they beat us with a lineup like that?" What happened that final week? Were the Sox overconfident?

PW: It happens. Kansas City had some good pitching and I think we were a little off our game. We had played in Cleveland that Sunday afternoon and flew to Kansas City. We were off that Monday. On Tuesday we were supposed to play but the game was rained out. We didn't play until that Wednesday night so we basically had three days off. Give them some credit, they never gave up. With Washington we went up against Phil Ortega and he had a great arm.

(Author's Note: After the double header loss to the A's, the Sox came home and were eliminated when Ortega and the Senators shut the Sox out 1-0.)

ML: How much, if any, does it bother you and the guys that as talented as the Sox were from 1963 through 1967, the team never got to the World Series?

PW: It was a tremendous disappointment to me; at least some of the guys on those clubs like J.C. Martin, Al Weis and Tommy Agee would get a chance with the Mets in the World Series.

ML: A lot of White Sox fans talk about the difference in media coverage in Chicago today especially in the wake of the Tribune Company owning the Cubs, WGN-TV and radio and the Chicago Tribune. But when you played wasn't the shoe on the other foot? I mean the Sox were the ones involved in pennant races and it was the Sox who were posting a winning record every year through 1967. What was media coverage like for the Sox when you played?

PW: I thought it was good. We were treated fairly by the media. I guess its human nature to think that the other clubs are getting more or better coverage then you.

ML: I'd like to try something different and toss out some names of some of the Chicago media from when you played. How about giving me some impressions of them and what type of baseball reporters they were.

Bob Elson- PW: I really liked Bob. He and I along with "Tug" McGraw, Ron Taylor and Denny McClain went to Viet Nam and met a lot of our troop's one off season. Bob never judged people; he treated all the players fair.

Milo Hamilton- PW: Super guy, a lot of fun. I saw him over the summer at the All-Star game in Chicago. Milo definitely was one of my favorites.

Jack Brickhouse- PW: I saw him a few years ago in spring training in Mesa before he passed away. Jack was a very friendly guy and was always very fair to the White Sox.

Brent Musberger (Chicago American) - PW: I remember Brent from when he was doing the ski reports! I was good friends with him; we used to play squash a lot at the Chicago Athletic Club.

ML: Who were the toughest pitchers that you faced in your White Sox days?

PW: There were a lot of them! "Whitey" Ford, Mel Stottlemyre, Dick Radatz, Sam McDowell. You know it's funny, the Indians in the 60's never had really good teams but they always had good pitchers. McDowell, Luis Tiant, Steve Hargin, Sonny Siebert, and Jack Kralick they were all very good.

ML: After your playing days ended you coached and managed in the minor leagues. Where did you manage? And who would you say were your greatest influences as a field manager?

PW: I worked in Rochester (Orioles) for three years, Ft. Lauderdale (Yankees) where we wound up winning the championship, West Haven (Yankees), Connecticut for two years...Syracuse (Yankees) and the Iowa Oaks (White Sox). I say the biggest influences for me were Al Lopez

and Ralph Houk. Both of those men were outstanding managers who thought one or two moves ahead of everyone and they were great motivators.

ML: You got into the travel business in the early 80's. How did that come about, what was the attraction for you?

PW: When I first got out of baseball I worked for three years in sales for Miller Beer. I was always interested in travel since I used the airlines enough when I was in baseball. When I started you were getting commission money directly from the airlines themselves. It's something that I enjoyed; it's a business where you sell your services. I still do a lot of tours, both bus and plane, to Major League baseball parks around the country. Every year we charter a bus and head up to Seattle for some games and I go on that tour every year.

ML: Sum up for me your days in Chicago Pete. Were they happy one's for you?

PW: They were very, very happy ones. I go back to Chicago whenever I can. Chicago meant a lot to me. The fans always treated me well; I still have friends there that I've known for over 30 years like Nick Kladis. My two children were born and educated there, heck I lived in Mayor Daley's neighborhood at 31st and Princeton.



