

Eric Soderholm

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2002. Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2002.

It staggers the mind.

25 years have passed since that magical season of 1977. Jimmy Carter was in the White House, baseball had just expanded to Seattle and Toronto, and number one songs included Abba's "Dancing Queen," "Hotel California" by the Eagles, "Sir Duke" from Stevie Wonder and "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac which you could hear on the Larry Lujack "Superjock" show on WLS radio "The Rock of Chicago." The rock group Styx, led by South Sider and die-hard Sox fan Dennis DeYoung was packing them in at concerts nationally. The top three television shows in America were "Laverne & Shirley," "Happy Days" and "Three's Company" all part of ABC's blockbuster lineup. In July the Bears went to training camp preparing for a season that would see them make the playoffs for the first time since 1963, with a backfield composed of Bob Avellini at quarterback, Walter Payton at halfback and Roland Harper at fullback.

That summer was also known for the "Southside Hit Men," "Na Na Na Na, Hey Hey Hey... Goodbye," and "Chi, Oh My!" in Sports Illustrated. It was the summer of Richie Zisk, Oscar Gamble, Jim Spencer, Jorge' Orta, Alan Bannister, Ralph Garr (Beep, Beep!), Chet Lemon, Jim Essian, Steve Stone, Lerrin LaGrow and Eric Soderholm.

90 wins, 192 home runs, a .444 team slugging average, 2,502 total bases, 498 long hits and 1,657,135 screaming, passionate, grateful maniacs otherwise known as White Sox fans.

It was for many of us, a summer of a lifetime.

Eric Soderholm played a major part in that magic show. Signed as a bargain basement free agent by Bill Veeck, Soderholm would go on to win the "Comeback Player of the Year" award thanks to 25 home runs, 77 runs scored, 67 RBI's, a .280 batting average and a league leading .978 fielding percentage at third base, with only eight errors for the season (only one after the All-Star break). All that after missing the entire 1976 season due to knee and rib injuries suffered in a fall.

Soderholm also played with Minnesota, Texas and the Yankees before retiring after the 1980 season. He now owns his own company Soder World, located in Hinsdale which is a healing and wellness center treating both the mind as well as the body.

Eric spoke with me about overcoming what for many, should have been a career ending injury, and a summer when Sox fans dared to dream the "Impossible Dream" of a World Series.

(Author's Note: I've never done this before. I've never before composed an "author's note" leading into an interview, but I've never spoken with anyone quite like Eric Soderholm before either. I thought it was best to let you readers know that this is not just "an ex-ballplayer remembers the good old days" interview. I found Soderholm to be honest, funny, very well read, a deep thinker, a spiritualist, a successful businessman, a published author, a humanist and a man who is deeply grateful for his days playing with the White Sox. That's a pretty broad package isn't it?)

I mentioned to Eric that in researching for this conversation, I looked at the 1977 White Sox media guide and it had a picture of him without his mustache. I told him how odd that looked. Eric laughed and said "you know it's funny you should mention that! I just came back from getting a haircut and had it shaved off! I'm 55 now and was tired of dying it. I don't know if it's going to stay off but I wanted to try something different."

That explains Eric Soderholm perfectly. A guy who was never afraid to do things his own way, to try different things. After all, how many poets do you know who played third base for the Sox?)

ML: Eric how did it all start in pro baseball for you? You signed your first deal with the Twins, wasn't it?

ES: I was a decent player in high school in Miami but I only weighed 150 pounds soaking wet. My coach helped me get a work / study deal at Southern Georgia junior college where I played ball and worked to help pay for my schooling. They had a real fine program and had won their conference like five years in a row. I just felt at home there and kept working. As I got older I started to gain weight. I got up to 175 pounds and the ball started jumping off my bat. Balls that used to be looped just over the shortstop were now shooting on a line into the gaps. After this went on for a bit my coach, George Cook told me that scouts were coming to see me. I never dreamed that I might play pro baseball. Even as a kid if you asked me what I wanted to be, I would have told you a dentist, not a ballplayer. I just didn't think that could happen. I was the Twins #1 draft pick in 1968. I signed for 23,500 dollars and the Twins agreed to pay for the rest of my college education. I was in shock that I got that much money.

ML: After working through the minors you started to hit your stride in 1974 with the Twins and had a fine 1975 going for you when you had that very serious injury. How did that happen?

ES: I had a real good 1974 and went back to Calvin Griffith, the Twins owner to ask for a raise. I wanted 10 thousand dollars. Griffith opened his desk and took out a pad. It had on it every time I wasn't able to do something...things like 'April 12' grounded into double play with the bases loaded.' It had like a dozen items on it. Griffith told me, "I'll give you a two-thousand-dollar

raise or you can go back to Miami and fish.” I took it because I was young and didn’t want to go back to Miami and fish but it really motivated me for 1975.

It was in September, I was hitting .286 and I was sitting next to my teammate Jerry Terrell and told him “wouldn’t it be great if I could end the year at .286? I’d really stick it to Griffith.” Later that day, I was out with my wife and some friends. We were looking at buying some land so that someday we could build a house. The patch of land we were looking at was undeveloped and our car got stuck in some sand. I got out trying to find some wood, something we could shove under the wheels to help get going. I saw a piece of wood and reached down to pick it up. As I was bringing it up, it blocked my vision and I never saw that it was covering a storm drain. I fell right into it, breaking four ribs and seriously damaging my left knee. I was in severe pain when I got to the emergency room. They operated on the knee but didn’t completely remove the cartilage.

Looking back, that was a mistake, but at the time we thought it was best to take as little out as possible. I missed the rest of the season. I did finish hitting .286 but not the way I wanted to. Let that be a lesson, be careful what you wish for! (laughing)

Anyway I went to spring training 1976, but my knee couldn’t take the pounding so they had to go back in and do another surgery, this time taking a lot more out. I had to miss the entire year.

ML: You were one of the first athletes to rehab using what was then, a new technology, the Nautilus system. How did that happen?

ES: I read about the Nautilus Company and what they were doing. So I called them up and said that if they’d let me rehab using their equipment at their training center, I’d let them use my name and give a testimony on the company’s behalf. They agreed, so I worked with them for nine or 10 months. I had a personal trainer and they rebuilt my body. I was in great shape both physically and mentally. The Twins weren’t happy though that I decided to train with someone else.

ML: How did it come about that you signed with the Sox?

ES: Calvin Griffith told me that even though I missed the 1976 season the Twins wanted me back. He said he’d give me the same salary I had in 1975. Well free agency was now in place. I thought it over and said that I’d like to see what’s out there. Four teams drafted me, even though I missed the previous season. The White Sox offered me a contract for 25,000 dollars. The Twins matched it. The Sox through Roland Hemond then upped the offer to 55,000 dollars. I said how can you do this, since I missed all of 1976? Hemond explained that if I was released in spring training, the Sox wouldn’t be obligated for the deal and they felt it was a good gamble. My agent called the Twins back, and told them what the Sox did. 10 minutes later the Twins called back and matched it again. I was leaning towards staying in Minnesota, when Bill Veeck personally called my agent and said the Sox would guarantee half of the deal even if I was released. The Twins wouldn’t touch that, Calvin Griffith got really upset about it all and that’s how I came to

the Sox. Veeck always did have a soft spot for folks overcoming hardships; I mean he's a guy who lost most of his leg.

ML: Let's talk about 1977. It was a pretty unsettled spring training. The Sox literally traded "Bucky" Dent to the Yankees for Oscar Gamble, Bob Polinsky and LaMarr Hoyt two hours before the team broke camp to head north. Did you guys have any sense that the season would turn out to be so successful?

ES: No, you couldn't possibly think that. We were all rejects and castoffs. We were the "Bad News Bears." But we didn't have any pressure on us and we all got along. We did well early in the season, Richie Zisk was smoking and we started to think 'we aren't rejects, we can play.' Before you knew it, those "Southside Hit Men" T-shirts were out, the fans were really supporting us, and the media was very positive towards us and that was very important. It was fun.

I remember reading that Las Vegas had us at 100-1 to win the pennant that year. It was amazing because Chet Lemon was the only legit player we had. He had to cover all the ground in left and right center. Ralph Garr was fast and I love him, but he couldn't catch a cold. Zisk's range in the outfield was about five feet. My range was either hit it right at me or I can dive to my left or right, that's it. Alan Bannister had a bad rotator cuff; all he could do was sling the ball. Jorge Orta is a great guy but he may have been the worst second baseman ever at turning the double play and Lamar Johnson was just a big target at first. All these nobodies, yet somehow we won.

ML: The Sox introduced baseball to Canada by playing the Blue Jays on Opening Day. You lost 9-5, but in brutal conditions, rapped out 15 hits. Was that where the "Southside Hit Men" mentality started? That it didn't matter who was pitching or the conditions; that you guys could hit.

ES: I think so. I remember Richie Zisk hit a blast and we felt pretty good about things. I remember it was snowing so hard that I had trouble picking up the white ball against that background. Doug Ault of the Blue Jays hit a shot that caught me deep, deep in the pocket of my glove. I knocked the ball down and threw him out but I spent the rest of that game praying that nobody hit any balls to me. I thought my hand was broken; it hurt so much because of the cold.

ML: On May 14, in much better weather, you played the Indians in a game that started at 10:30 in the morning. It didn't seem to bother the Sox because they won 18-2. What time did you guys have to be at the park?

ES: I think it was around eight or 8:30. We didn't take any batting practice. That was the game where Jim Spencer drove in eight runs. We were sitting on the bench thinking that we'd kill to have a game like that.

ML: The Sox started to hit their stride in June. By early July things were rolling along. You swept four from the Twins to move into first place. That's when Nancy Faust and the "Na Na

Hey Hey" song took off and fans started demanding curtain calls after home runs. What was your reaction to that initially?

ES: When the curtain calls started I was uncomfortable with that... several players were. It could be misunderstood by the other team that we were trying to show them up, talking trash and that kind of stuff. I understood where the fans were coming from in all this. They were happy, excited and the support was wonderful. They were producing a lot of positive energy and that helped us. After a while, you felt obligated to go out and respond to them even if you weren't comfortable. As I look back from today, especially when I see what guys like Sammy Sosa are doing, we really didn't do that much. We were simply the first and it was different for the time.

ML: Perhaps your greatest personal moment that year was on July 30, a nationally televised game on NBC. The Sox had come from behind to beat the Royals on Friday night. In this game the Sox trailed 3-2 in the 7th when you came up against Doug Bird. Bird was a tough pitcher because he threw almost sidearm, yet you drilled a three run shot in the lower left center field deck to give the Sox a 5-3 lead. It ended with the Sox winning 6-4. Talk me through the at-bat, what you were feeling, especially when you hit the pitch.

ES: That was the most powerful, impacting moment I had in my career. As you were asking the question, I was thinking about it and I still get goose bumps. When I hit the ball I thought it had a chance. When it went in the seats the energy that came from the fans shook the park. It was a magical moment, the park was electric. As I was running the bases I could not feel my feet hitting the ground. I mean that. The place was up for grabs. I remember that I took a big jump to touch home plate and then I was mobbed by the guys. Incredible.

ML: After taking Game #1 of the Sunday double header in still another come from behind win, the Sox lead stood at 6 ½ games. The Royals won the second game and Hal McRae egged on Sox fans by hitting a home run and then taking forever to get around the bases. As he touched home plate he had the audacity to tip his hat to the crowd. Sox fans threw whatever garbage they had at him but the message was sent that the Royals were angered by what was going on. The Royals felt the Sox and Sox fans were bush league. Any truth to that line of thought?

ES: That perception could have been taken. We knew that the fans and the guys weren't trying to show anybody up but the Royals took offense to it. I respect McRae because he was motivated by all that. The Royals won 16 straight games and closed the season winning like 32 out of 38. I'd look in the paper and see the Royals won again and kept thinking 'damn are they ever going to lose?' Some folks have said we choked down the stretch but that's not true. We played a game or two over .500. We didn't choke; it's just that Kansas City was so hot. Nobody could beat them or catch them. *(Author's Note: Starting on August 17, Kansas City won 35 of the next 39 games. At the same time the White Sox went 24-22.)*

ML: Did Richie Zisk call a team meeting after that game? There were reports that he did and that he suggested the Sox cool it with the enthusiasm. For whatever reason the team wasn't the same. The Sox lost three of four to Texas and then went to Kansas City and were swept in three.

ES: I don't remember a meeting after that game. I know we did have some team meetings that year. Bob Lemon (*Author's Note: then Sox manager*) called one, and I remember one time Bill Veeck spoke with us towards the end of the season. It was along the lines of 'keep trying, the season's not over yet.'

ML: What was it like to play for Bob Lemon?

ES: It was pretty easy. We were on a roll most of the year. Bob didn't have to do much. He just filled out the lineup card and let us play... and that's not a bad thing. Sometimes that's all you need. It was well known that Bob liked to have a cold one now and again. I remember we had a bat rack that kind of stuck out into the dugout. One time I put my bat back in the rack and Bob was behind it and he was asleep! Bob may have been out to three or four in the morning and was just catching up on some things (laughing).

ML: Eric I guess you were the "Renaissance Man" of the Sox. You hit home runs, played great defense and wrote poetry?

ES: (laughing) I guess I was a "new age" player in the 70's. I did. My grandfather wrote poetry and I got that from him. I still write things.

There is a local magazine called "All for You" and I write something for them every month. I've been writing a lot of post 9-11 stories on how to get past the fear that's inside of everyone, how to release it and get on with your life.

I was always open to new ideas. I wanted to do anything that I thought could help me. I was teased a lot because I was into hypnosis, bio feedback, positive feedback, meditation. I remember Sox announcer Jimmy Piersall ripping me one night from the booth talking about 'what's baseball coming to...' and how 'when I (Piersall) played, I didn't need positive thinking,' but that's who I was. I know Howard Cosell was intrigued. We played a Monday night game on ABC and Cosell asked me if I'd read my poem "A Warm Day In August" on the air. I still get requests to read that from people and fans that I meet or speak with.

ML: You retired after the 1980 season with the Yankees. Then you worked for the Cubs for a few years before getting into the legitimate ticket brokering business, correct?

ES: Yes. When I retired I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I had just had my fifth knee operation and didn't think I could play anymore. Dallas Green offered me a tryout with the Cubs and I wasn't convinced I was through yet so I gave it a shot for three weeks or so. Dallas saw how hard I tried but he also saw the pain I was going through. He called me in and said that he'd like for me to join the organization as an advance American League scout. I had nothing else so I said yes and gave him two years. I'd like to think I had a small part in helping the Cubs win the division in 1984.

After that I saw him and asked him for a raise because I was only making 23 thousand dollars. He asked how much I wanted and I said 55 or 60 thousand. Dallas opened his desk and pulled out a bunch of letters and said that "all these people want my job and will do it for less than I'm

getting now.” It was like I was back before Calvin Griffith. I thanked him for the opportunity and resigned.

One day a friend of mine called and asked if I'd like to see Michael Jackson in concert. Jackson was playing a show in Comiskey Park. I enjoyed his music so I called the Sox and asked if they had any tickets. I was told that the Sox weren't handling the ticket end, but my friend in the organization would call a guy named Don Patonio to see what he could get. It turned out Patonio remembered me from my days with the Sox. He asked for an autographed picture and gave me two front row tickets. I visited his office and saw how the phones were ringing off the hook, how busy the operation was how respectable it was. Don paid taxes on his profits, gave money back if games or shows were cancelled and treated people with courtesy. I wanted to get into the business and Don helped set me up.

My business was called "Front Row Tickets" and I got very lucky because just as I was starting up, the Michael Jordan show came to Chicago. We did tremendous business because of the demand for Bulls tickets and the Bears going to the playoffs every year helped a lot as well. We made seven million dollars a year. Unfortunately, that business drove a wedge between me and Jerry Reinsdorf the Sox owner. Jerry couldn't understand how I was able to sell his product for more money than he was able to charge. It was the law of supply and demand. Jerry had to try to sell 40 thousand seats a night. I just had to sell a small number of tickets to individuals who had a strong need for them. Like an owner who wanted to take a client out to a Sox game. The client did a million dollars' worth of business with that owner and the owner wanted to make sure his client had the best seats.

It was Roland Hemond who finally went to Jerry and said that the 25th anniversary of the 1977 team was coming up and that a difference of business opinion shouldn't get in the way of that. Jerry said fine and I was finally able to participate in "Sox Fest" last year. I really enjoyed it and also played in the Sox golf tournament this year.

My brothers now run the business. We've scaled back to just one office now. Someday perhaps the differences between Jerry and me will disappear. I hope so.

ML: You now run Soder World a healing / wellness center located on the corner of 91st Street and Route 83 in unincorporated Hinsdale. Can you tell me about that?

ES: I've been reading for a number of years a lot of material by spiritual leaders. They try to get us to see who we are at the core and also try to get humans to see themselves from a different perspective. We are only here for a short physical period of time. After that our physical reality evolves into something else, call it unconditional love, and goes on forever. Soder World was started by my daughter, a licensed massage therapist. She was doing that work in California for a few years and called one night to say that she'd like to open a center in Chicago. She asked for my support and help. I was all for it.

We deal in alternative therapy to help individuals. We offer yoga, acupuncture, hypnosis, massage. I teach some classes myself. I also do hypnosis. The center started in 1997 and we really have helped people in need.

It's my hope that someday after Jerry Reinsdorf and I have become close again that I can come back and help the White Sox win a World Championship. That's what I want to do. I could help the players by teaching them how the mind works, how to stay at a high state of consciousness, how to relax and perform to the best of their abilities and how to block out the pressure and fear of failure.

(Author's Note: Here is an example of some of Soderholm's poetry. It is from Richard Lindberg's book, "Who's On Third?-The Chicago White Sox Story.")

Saga of the 1977 White Sox

With every new day a different star was born, always coming in on time.
And if I named them all you know we'd never finish this rhyme.
But the real stars were you, the great fans.
You made this summer exciting.
It was something we'll tell our grandkids about when we get old and gray.
How in the summer of '77 the pennant somehow slipped away.
The season went by too quickly and many of us cried in our beer.
The winter will pass by slowly as we await a new year.