

## Jerry Koosman

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

*For a pitcher who only spent two and a quarter seasons with the White Sox, the compliments come fast and furious about him. Ron Kittle, in his interview said not having him on the team was one of the reasons for the disaster in 1984. Former Sox announcer Joe McConnell called him a second pitching coach in the 1983 special "Next Year Is Here," which aired in September 1983 on WFLD-TV. And perhaps the highest compliment of all came from owner Jerry Reinsdorf who said trading Jerry Koosman was one of the two worst baseball mistakes he ever made. (Author's Note: The other being the firing of Tony LaRussa.) Considering Reinsdorf's history that's high praise indeed.*

*Jerry Koosman was already a multiple 20 game winner and All-Star when he was acquired by the Sox in August 1981. Koosman played the game for the highest stakes, and under the toughest pressure, when he clinched the World Series title for the 1969 New York Mets, beating the Baltimore Orioles in Game #5. He had great talent but perhaps his primary gift was his intelligence. He was considered one of the smartest players in baseball, a guy who could remember how he pitched to a hitter five years before and then instantly recall how he got him out. Koosman was the type of player who'd notice the little things and immediately use them to his advantage. As he got older and lost some of the pop on his fastball, he actually got better, mixing in an assortment of breaking balls, throwing to spots, and again using his brains to get hitters out.*

*"Kooz" as he was known, is now retired, living in Wisconsin, where he likes to play golf and still keep close tabs on baseball. You'll see him often at Minnesota Twins games where he still tries to out-think the players, only this time from the stands.*

*I talked with Jerry about that magnificent 1983 season, about his greatest prank pulled on then Mariners pitcher Gaylord Perry, about what went on during the recent 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion of the 1983 team, about a little known incident during the 1969 World Series that still drives Earl Weaver crazy, and considering the troubles the Sox have had the past few seasons, what qualities are needed for someone to be a great manager.*

**ML:** Jerry when the Sox acquired you in August 1981 (*Author's Note: The Sox got Koosman from the Twins for infielders Ron Perry and Ivan Mesa, along with cash and outfielder Randy Johnson*) did you ever think to yourself, 'I've put in 13 years, I'm playing near home, I think I'm just going to retire?'

**JK:** I never thought about ending my career, but I also didn't want to leave Minnesota. Because I was a veteran I had to give my approval on a trade and I did, after certain incentives were invoked. I don't remember if the Twins or White Sox took care of them. I remember that when the Sox got me I had to join them immediately because they needed someone out of the bullpen. It's actually pretty interesting how the Sox even got me. Because of the strike that year, Billy Gardner, the Twins manager, was using all the pitchers a lot, in different roles, just to help them

get back in shape quickly. I saved like five games in a week and because a few of them were against Milwaukee, the Sox heard about it and noticed. They needed a left hander so they pushed for the trade.

**ML:** Like you said 1981 was a strange year because of the strike so it was really hard to get a read on the Sox but in the off season they started to make some moves acquiring guys like Steve Kemp and Tom Paciorek. 82' saw the Sox jump out to a 20-10 record, then level off the rest of the year. Was it a situation of all these new guys learning to have to play together?

**JK:** I don't know if it was that. I do know that through all the acquisitions, the Sox had a bundle of talent. I felt that what we needed was something to bring us closer together as teammates so I went to Tony (LaRussa) and suggested the idea of a 'kangaroo court.' (*Author's Note: A kangaroo court is a humorous mock trial where the players are brought before a 'judge' and fined for various infractions. Most of them the made up variety!*) Tony loved the idea so we had Mike Squires made the judge, and we'd hold court, fining guys and taking all the money and putting it into a kitty for a monthly team party. Tony as well would also have a mandatory team party once a month on a road trip that he'd pay for and I do mean mandatory. You were required to be there. So that was two parties a month. It was a great time and gave the guys a chance to sit around and talk baseball. We did that a lot. I remember many times when I and Mike Squires and other guys would sit around the clubhouse for hours talking with Tony about baseball after a game. About the only guy who had any problems with the kangaroo court that I can remember was Tony Bernazard. It helped bring us together, we learned things about each other and the game and when the bell rang we were really ready to help each other.

**ML:** During the off season after 1982, through more trades and the free agent compensation process, the Sox went out and got Randy Martz and Steve Mura. That gave the Sox seven pitchers who had won 10 or more games in a season in the big leagues at one time or another. (*Author's Note: They were LaMarr Hoyt, Rich Dotson, Britt Burns, Floyd Bannister, Koosman and the aforementioned Martz and Mura*) When you assemble that much pitching talent were you ever worried about your job? You were 39 and had spent 13 years in the majors.

**JK:** To be honest with you I don't really remember those guys, but I wasn't worried about losing my job. I knew what I needed to do and I always did it in spring training at the correct pace.

**ML:** That 1983 season started off very slowly for the Sox. At one time in May they were eight games under .500. Was there ever a time when you thought, 'this is slipping away, we're not going to be able to pull this off?'

**JK:** No. I had been on enough teams to know that regardless of how good a club you have you are going to go through two slumps a season. Now teams that aren't very good are going to go through longer slumps. In a 162 game season you are going to have your bad games, bad umpire calls, injuries, bad hops...it happens. You've got to remember that if you are a good team you're not going to keep getting those bad things happening.

**ML:** On June 22 the Sox finally clawed back to the .500 mark after you beat Gaylord Perry and the Mariners 6-3. The Sox were back to 33-33 but all anybody could talk about was the 'false teeth caper' that you pulled. What was that all about?

**JK:** (laughing) The last game of that series the press was playing up that fact that the two old men me and Gaylord were going to face each other. I was in the trainer's room talking about it and one of the trainers, I think it was Herm Schneider, said he had a friend who was a dentist and maybe he could get us a set of false teeth. We also thought about getting a hair piece, something that I could leave out on the mound. So I get the false teeth and stick them in my back pocket. What I'm going to do is go out to the mound and when I know the camera isn't on me, take them out and leave them on the mound. Then during an at bat, I was going to call time, look down and act like I just found these on the mound! I'd have the bat boy come out to get them and bring them over to the Mariners dugout.

So the game starts and I was going to do this in like the first or second inning before the game got too involved but I forgot to do it. I'd go back to the dugout, sit down, and realize they were still there. I forgot to do it in the third inning, then the fourth inning. Finally it was the fifth inning when I dropped them out there but by then nobody paid any attention. After the game I'm talking with the reporters and figured there was no reason to bring it up, that nobody saw it, when a bat boy came by and gave me the teeth in a paper cup! Gaylord found them, picked them up and was returning them. (laughing). So the next day the AP has a story about it, where they talked to Gaylord and he says "he doesn't know me well enough to accept them." It turned out to be really funny. But that's not the best stunt that I had planned and never did. I told this to Joe Torre when he was the Mets manager and I said the same thing to Tony. What I wanted to do during a game was when a hitter stepped into the box, to call time. Then go into my back pocket and pull out a 'little black book.' I was going to make it look like I was opening it up, running my finger down the page, and reading it. Like how I had planned to pitch to this guy. Then I put it back in my pocket and start pitching. If the guy then got a hit, I was going to call time again when the next hitter stepped in, pull the book out and rip out the page like the scouting report was all wrong. I never did do that.

**ML:** You know those stunts sound like they wouldn't make that much of a difference but over such a long season those funny moments can really mean a lot to a team can't they?

**JK:** Sure. We had some really funny guys on that 83' team. Marc "Booter" Hill was a guy like that, always laughing, always saying something funny. Just a great guy and one of those guys that you like to be around. Mike Squires was another one. It's funny that two guys who didn't play all that much had a big part in the reason that club won. "Bull" Luzinski was another guy like that, he and I used to drive into the park together and we'd always talk baseball.

**ML:** Everybody knows the story of how the Sox took over and blew away the rest of the division. That takes us to the night of September 17, 1983. That's the night you started with a chance to wrap up the Sox first playoff spot in 24 seasons. Do you remember anything about what you were thinking or feeling that night?

**JK:** I strive for those games. Those types of games always brought out my best. I was excited because I sure didn't want to lose it. Nobody wants to be the goat.

I wasn't afraid and I don't think major league players can ever think that way because if you do, you simply can't give it your best mental effort. If you think you are going to fail, you will fail.

**ML:** You took a 3-1 lead into the 9<sup>th</sup> inning when Seattle got a couple of scratch infield hits and Tony replaced you with Dennis Lamp. Lamp gave up a game tying double before the Sox won the title with a run in the last of the 9<sup>th</sup>. How disappointed were you that you never got the win?

**JK:** You're happy the team won, sure I would have liked to have gotten the win because in baseball you're paid by your statistics, but the main thing was that we won the division. We played hard that season. Afterwards in the off season you might go back in your mind and think about all the games the bullpen may have lost for you and you think to yourself, 'why does this happen to me?' I never liked to have the bullpen be responsible for my game, I always wanted to go out there and finish what I started but if the manager decided that I was coming out, I'd do anything to help the guy who replaced me. I remember a time we were in Dodger Stadium and I must have thrown over to first base, 13 times in a row, just to give the bullpen adequate time to warm up. The fans were booing me like crazy but I didn't care. I'd work with managers to try to help the bullpen guys know how to pitch to certain hitters and I always liked to work fast. When I was with the Mets my game average was something like 2:10. When I got to the Sox, I'd have to tell "Pudge" (*Author's Note: Carlton Fisk*) to speed it up because he liked to take his time calling a game.

**ML:** I recently read where Jerry Reinsdorf was quoted in a story as saying that you spoke with him in the post-game celebration after the Sox clinched and you told him to savor the moment because it doesn't happen that often. Even winning just a divisional title is hard isn't it?

**JK:** It is... although if you have the talent I always felt it was easier to win a division than a playoff series. In the playoffs, especially with the best of five series, anything can happen. You can get a fluke play that costs you a game or have an injury and that's it, you're done. Over the course of 162 game schedule, the best talent usually wins out.

**ML:** Let me just break away from the Sox for a moment because you were on that 1969 Mets club that shocked the baseball world. A lot of fans thought that was a fluke, but you were telling me about a little 'gamesmanship' that the Mets pulled off with the Cleon Jones hit by pitch incident. (*Author's Note: In the 6<sup>th</sup> inning of Game #5 with the Orioles leading 3-0, umpires awarded Cleon Jones first base saying he was hit on the foot by a pitch. Donn Clendenon then homered bringing the Mets back to 3-2 in a game they'd go on to win 5-3, with Koosman pitching, winning the series.*)

**JK:** That baseball *never* hit Jones. The pitch bounced in the dirt and rolled into our dugout. Immediately Gil Hodges (*Author's Note: The Mets manager*) told me to pick up the ball and rub it on my shoe. I did and put a black shoe polish mark on it. Hodges in a split second grabbed the ball and ran out to the umpires arguing that the ball hit Jones and here was the mark to prove it. He sold the umpires on it, they gave Jones first base and that was a big play! Some people call

that cheating but that kind of stuff went on all the time in baseball. There were times when Hodges, if I wasn't pitching, would tell me to go around the ballpark and see if anybody was in the outfield or the scoreboard spying in to steal signs.

**ML:** Jerry after 20 years do you have an answer for why the Sox did not win the A.L.C.S. versus Baltimore?

**JK:** We were ready, we were the better club but I think each guy tried a little harder than he usually did. Each guy was trying so hard that they tightened up. Nobody wanted to fail in that situation. You play your best when you're loose and relaxed.

**ML:** Jerry I have a theory, I don't know how valid it is but I wanted to run it past you. I think the collected history of baseball failure in Chicago has an effect on players when they get into the post season. What I mean is that it's impossible for players *not* to read in the media how long it's been since a Chicago team has made the World Series, or to hear on TV that 'the White Sox haven't won a post season series since 1917...' To me that just increases the pressure. Any thoughts?

**JK:** I don't think the media influences negative performances in players but I *do* think the press puts negative thoughts and feeling into the fans and the *fans* put that added pressure on the players. That's just one man's opinion. That's why I always say I had more fun with the 83' White Sox than any other team I ever played for. They were such a positive group. You'd go to the park every day and nobody had any bad things to say, there was no negative feelings around. You don't want to be around negative players and if you have them on a ball club you've got to get rid of them.

**ML:** Two words for you... Jerry Dybzinski. Both Vance Law and Ron Kittle talked about that huge mistake that he made in Game #4 of the A.L.C.S. but they also spoke about how he had the guts afterwards to stand and face the media when other guys would have ducked out the back door. (*Author's Note: In a scoreless Game #4 in the 7<sup>th</sup> inning, Dybzinski got caught over running second base on a single by Julio Cruz. In the ensuing rundown Vance Law who had stopped at third originally, tried scoring but was thrown out at home. The White Sox failed to score a run despite three hits and a balk and lost the A.L.C.S. 3-0 in 10 innings.*)

**JK:** "Dibber" was a team player. Afterwards he said "I screwed up." It was a mental mistake and those things happen. I wish it hadn't happened but they do. Physical mistakes are part of the game but mental mistakes are something you can't overlook. We worked on what happened in the spring, you go into those drills knowing that the *exact same thing* can happen in a game, in fact you take the approach that they *are* going to happen and you work to eliminate them.

**ML:** That off season the Sox acquired Ron Reed from the Phillies for a player to be named later and also selected the great Tom Seaver in the draft compensation pool. There was a time lag before you got the word that you were the player to be named later and got shipped to Philadelphia. Before that happened did you talk with Tom to tell him about Chicago and get him ready? After all you guys played together for years in New York.

**JK:** We spoke a lot. In fact I was the one who convinced him to accept the selection and come here. I was very disappointed to hear that I had been traded, I wanted to have the chance to play with him again and also to win that title here.

**ML:** I don't know how much satisfaction this is to you but Jerry Reinsdorf, Ron Kittle and Joe McConnell all talked about how important you were to the team. Reinsdorf went so far as to say letting you go was one of the two biggest baseball mistakes he ever made. What do you feel that you brought to the White Sox table?

**JK:** Those comments from Mr. Reinsdorf and Roland Hemond (*Author's Note: The White Sox G.M.*) were very flattering and I appreciated them saying that very much. I had fun with the Sox and I also took the approach that it was a long season and not to get to up and down... to stay on an even keel. I tried to help everybody get in a good frame of mind. Like I said "Bull" and I hung out a lot together and we'd talk baseball a lot.

**ML:** You played for some outstanding managers in your time, Gil Hodges with the Mets; Gene Mauch with the Twins; Tony in Chicago and Paul Owens in Philadelphia... Did those guys have any common traits that made them such good field managers? Or to put it another way what makes a good baseball manager?

**JK:** All of those managers had tremendous knowledge of the game and the ability to be one, two, three moves ahead of the situation. In Tony's case specifically, he had great intelligence. He always came into a game prepared and he knew his players. He talked pitching a lot with me and those are the kind of things that helped each other. Tony also had one set of rules for everybody on the club. It was the same for Rich Dotson, Jerry Dybzinski or LaMarr Hoyt.

**ML:** Now that Jerry Manuel is gone, what type of manager do you think would suit the Sox best? I know you've seen them play this year...let's assume that the club will basically remain a veteran unit.

**JK:** That's difficult to answer. There's no question that the Sox have great talent. Part of the problem I think is the fact that there are too many distractions in baseball today. New stadiums, nice clubhouses, just a lot of things that can take your mind off the game and cause you to lose your focus. I think the new Sox manager has to remove some of the distractions and work with the team mentally.

**ML:** Former Sox relief pitcher Rick White caused some controversy this year when he publicly accused Manuel of not knowing how to set roles for his pitching staff. Is having a role overrated? When you pitched for the Sox you started, threw long relief and even saved five games.

**JK:** I don't know Rick personally but he was right to some extent. You have to have a role because you have to be able to train accordingly. Each role requires different training. In 1982 for example, I didn't know what my role was going to be. It's tough to do your best if you don't know how to physically train for it. Pitchers need to run a lot and if they don't know if they are starting, working long or short relief they don't know how much to run and how often.

**ML:** Lots of fans, and I'm one of them, accuse the Sox of overrating their young pitchers and rushing them to the big leagues. What makes a successful major league pitcher and have the qualities changed since you played?

**JK:** No they haven't changed. The game is still played the same. You have to have the talent, you have to have your body in condition to perform and you have to study the hitters. You run into problems when you're not in shape, and lose your focus and concentration.

**ML:** How do you feel about pitch counts? Manuel seemed to be a pretty firm believer in them even if it meant taking out a starter who was doing well.

**JK:** They are fine as a general rule. But you have to trust your judgment. There were games when I'd throw 120 pitches and feel fine, there were other games where I'd start to lose it after 80. You can sit and watch and know when a pitcher is starting to lose stuff. That's what statistics have done to baseball. It's made the game more complicated and you have some managers now that do everything strictly by the numbers. I've seen managers bench a hot hitter simply because the numbers say that the guy doesn't hit this pitcher very well, but the fact is that right now he's hitting *everybody* well or he wouldn't be on the hot streak. So why bench him?

**ML:** Finally can you tell us a little about the 1983 reunion that was held in early September? Sox fans saw all the on the field activities, but there was a big dinner at Ditka's that Thursday for the team. What went on there?

**JK:** It was great...great atmosphere, great dinner, very entertaining. Everybody was there except for Salome Barojas and Juan Agosto. "Pudge" (Fisk) wasn't at the dinner but he was there on Saturday at the ballpark. I'll tell you how nice it was, transportation was scheduled to leave at 9:30 and 10:30. The first bus didn't leave until 11! At the dinner, Jerry Reinsdorf spoke for a bit then introduced Eddie Einhorn. Tony (LaRussa) and Dave (Duncan) were there well into the night. They stayed even though the Cardinals left since their series with the Cubs ended. Jimmy Leyland came in from Pittsburgh Tony spoke for a long time, he brought his coaches up to the podium and some of the players then got up to speak. Marc Hill did a very fine job talking about what that season meant to him. It was just a wonderful time.

