

B I L L V I R D O N

This conversation between Bill Virdon and Walter Langford is being taped on April 17 in Bill's home in Springfield, MO.

BV: Well, I just always enjoyed baseball. My father played any kind of baseball he could play. He went and played with town teams, etc. in Michigan. I guess that's how I really got the fever, but then ever since I can remember I always wanted to play, and I did anytime I could find someone who wanted to play too. As far as how I got mixed up in professional baseball, well, Michigan at that time was real big in baseball. All the schools and colleges there had teams.

My folks were originally from Missouri, and they moved to Detroit during the Depression looking for work. After the Depression they came back to Missouri. They wanted to come back home. Of course, I was born in Michigan and I came with them and went to West Plains, MO, which is about a hundred miles from here.

I played one high school baseball game. I'm not kidding. It just wasn't a part of their program. Of course, I played a little bit, on town teams. A friend of mine went out to Kansas and tried out, and they recommended that he go and play amateur ball in Kansas during the summer. So I talked him into taking me with him. I went up to the little town of Clay Center, Kansas, and we tried out for their team in a summer league where they played about 50-60 games. It was made up of college kids and high school kids who were interested in playing baseball. I made the club and my friend didn't. So I spent two summers out there and that's really how I got started professionally.

I spent two years in Kansas and then I was signed by the Yankees. Then I spent four years working my way up in their organization, from Class D up to Class AAA. In my last year with the Yankee organization I was traded to the Cardinals. You might remember the Enos Slaughter deal. He went from the Cardinals to the Yankees and I came over here. I spent one year in their minor league system and then I broke in with the Cardinals in 1955.

WL: You had two managers that year, Eddie Stanky and Harry Walker. The team came in seventh that season, but you had a good year. You had a lot of fine teammates. It's kind of hard to believe that a team with such players as Musial and Schoendienst and Ken Boyer and yourself, as well as Rip Repulski, Wally Moon, and Harvey Haddix could finish seventh.

BV: Well, it's typical in baseball. Our pitching wasn't very deep. And a number of us were very young. Boyer and myself, and even Wally Moon, who had just been up one year, and Repulski just two. The only two really old-timers were Musial and Schoendienst. But we just didn't have enough pitching to win. But I think that would have been the basis for a real good club if Frank Lane hadn't come along and broke it up. He changed it quite a bit the next year.

WL: In the early part of the following season Trader Lane must have peddled you to Pittsburgh.

BV: Yeah, he traded me.. I wasn't really happy about it. I lived in Missouri and liked playing with the Cardinals, for it was close to home. But I didn't object to it, for I was willing to play anywhere.

WL: You went to Pittsburgh for Dick Littlefield and Bobby Del Greco. The Cards didn't get much out of those two.

BV: No, it didn't turn out that well for them, although Del Greco played a number of years in the big leagues. He just never did hit a whole lot. But it's funny, as long as I've been around Pittsburgh as a player, manager, and coach, Bobby Del Greco still throws batting practice for the Pirates during the course of the summer. Don't get me wrong. That's not his only livelihood, that's a pastime.

WL: How was Bobby Bragan as a manager?

BV: Bobby was a thorough tactician. He knew all the ins and outs of baseball, and he had some success. I didn't mind playing for him at all. He was good to me. He did some strange things at times that got himself in trouble, but I guess we all do that.

WL: You had some good teammates there too, for a team that finished away down at that point - Mazerowski and Groat and Clemente and Friend, Face, Law.

BV: It took us a few years to get to the top. But the basis was there. Rickey was there when I got there, but he didn't stay long. He was very inactive at that point, more of a consultant. Joe Brown was the general manager.

WL: That was your best one-season average.

BV: Uh, huh, the best year I ever put together as far as base hits and average.

WL: ~~And the next season Bragan was manager at the start and then Murtaugh finished~~ In '58 you moved up all the way from 8th place to second.

BV: That was the start of the coming together of the club. We were starting to mature after playing a couple or three years together.

WL: In '59 you picked up Hoak and Dick Stuart and Smoky Burgess. And you were reunited with Harvey Haddix when you got over to Pittsburgh.

BV: That might have been the best deal ever made by anybody. Joe Brown got Hoak and Burgess and Haddix from Cincinnati for Frank Thomas and some guys who didn't amount to much. I'm not belittling Thomas, but the ingredients we got were ~~max~~ exactly what we needed.

WL: Tell me your recollections of Haddix' 12 perfect innings.

BV: I remember it quite clearly, really. I think you begin to notice it more after a few innings because it's a perfect game. There were only about two balls that were hit hard. There was a line drive to me in center field which was not a tough play. And there was a ball hit to shortstop. Schofield happened to be playing short that day, I don't remember why. The ball took a bad hop. It was hit hard, but right about the time he started to catch it, it took a high hop. His reaction was excellent. He caught the ball up near his ear and threw the man out. They're the only two

balls that were hit hard, except for Adcock's drive that ended the game.

WL: Haddix told me that many years later, talking with Bob Buhl, Bob told him that he was in center field during the game with glasses and a fellow sitting next to him with a towel signalled every pitch that was called by the catcher throughout the game.

BV: Yeah, I knew that. Of course, there's one thing you've got to understand. A lot of hitters won't take the signs that are being given. But there were certain hitters on that club that knew each pitch that was coming. His stuff and his control was so good that it didn't make any difference. But what I started to say about that game is that we had about 12 chances to score runs and we just couldn't get anybody around. Bob Skinner hit a ball in about the seventh inning, and at the time he hit the ball the wind was really blowing in because a storm was brewing. Without the wind that ball would have been away out of the park, and with a couple of runners on. So, I guess Harvey just wasn't supposed to win.

WL: Now, 1960 was the year. Anything in particular that put you guys on top?

BV: It was that trade that we mentioned earlier. Hoak, Burgess, and Haddix really gave us what we needed. And Mizelle, too, because we needed another starting pitcher. Otherwise, nothing special. It was just our year. Things started good right from the word Go.

WL: Was Murtaugh able to get more out of his players than some other managers?

BV: Well, I thought Danny was an exceptional person. Really kind of deceiving to a lot of people. Everybody thought he was a kind of low-key, laid back, not very smart individual, but that was far from the truth. He was very adept at the game of baseball and he knew all the ins and outs and how to manage and basically, I think, how to handle a group. I think he had trouble sometimes with individuals, but I think he did a great job. N obody could have treated me any better than he did. And he kind of set me up for my managing career. He encouraged me to get into it, and he set it up so that I would over there when he retired.

WL: I call that '60 Series the most bizarre or extraordinary of all World Series. The only one that ended on a home run on the last pitch of the last game, the only one in which one team doubled the other in runs, hits, home runs, etc. and everything except wins.

BV: And lost.

WL: Yep. I say you were lucky, though, that the Yankee rotation wasn't set up so Ford could pitch the first, fourth, and seventh games. It might have been a different story.

BV: I think we might all agree with that. But I'll tell you this. That Pirate club that year always won the game it had to win. It would be hard for me to say yes, he would have beat us for the third time if the rotation had been that way, 'cause I never saw anybody do it.

WL: Tell me, in '62 you had Al McBean. What kind of guy was he?

BV: He was a character, a braggart, telling everybody what he was going to do. And sometimes he did it. That one year he had an exceptional year. But he never did do much after that.

WL: You also had a pitcher in '62 that I know something about. Olivo from the Dominican Republic.

BV: Diomedes.

WL: That's right. He also had a brother nicknamed Chi-Chi who pitched in the majors briefly. They were heroes over there because they were two of the very first Dominicans to get to the majors. Then the Alou brothers and others came soon after and finally it turned into a flood. You had Tom Sturdivant in '62, too.

BV: Yeah, I'd played with Tom when I was in the Yankee organization. He was a sort of character too. From Oklahoma. Or at least he's there now, a sheriff or something.

WL: In '63 Willie Stargell became a regular with the Pirates.

BV: Yes, he'd been around for a while, and everybody liked his talent. But he had streamlined talent when he first came up. He wasn't that big and was fast

and sleek, good arm, stole bases. Later, by the nature of his weight, he got to where he couldn't run all that well. And he was a good person. Willie was just like a kind of father figure to a lot of people on the club. Not at that point but later on. He had real ability to lead by production.

WL: In '64 you had Manny Mota. Was Pittsburgh his first team?

BV: No, he was with the Giants when he first came up. Mota was a good hitter. In fact, we split playing time in center field my last couple of years.

WL: Can you account for Stevw Blass' inability to find the plate after pitching so well for a few years?

BV: Nobody knows. Of course, I was on the scene through all of that. I saw him start as a youngster, and struggle, and then become a good pitcher, and then the best pitcher in the league for two years, and then going back to nothing. He couldn't hit that wall over there. Oh, he could if there wasn't anything around. Put a hitter up there and he couldn't hit that wall.

There wasn't anything physically wrong with Blass. He'd go down to the bullpen and throw strikes, throw the ball well. But he ~~he~~ couldn't when he got on the mound. I don't think anybody knows. There something in the background somewhere.

WL: Well, in '65 you picked up Harry Walker again as manager.

BV: I played for Harry more than once. I played for him in Rochester in the Cardinal organization a full year, then a half year for him in St. Louis, and a full year in Pittsburgh.

WL: You had Gene Alley in '65. How would he rate with the likes of Marty Marion?

BV: You can't compare him with Marion and others because he didn't play long enough. But for a year or two he was as good as they were. I say that because of the all-around ability. He was an excellent shortstop with a very good arm, but he produced runs. He struggled for a couple of years before he had his three good years, and then he played a little more. But I don't think Gene cared that much about playing.

WL: I tell young people that Marion in his prime was as good as Ozzie Smith, though I think that Ozzie for consistency and covering ground, is the best.

BV: He does one thing I know no one else ever could do as well. He can dive for the ball and get up throwing and not even look like he was on the ground. I never saw anybody who could that like Ozzie. I've seen 'em dive and get up and throw, but not all in a split second like Ozzie.

WL: After '68, were you a coach for the Pirates?

BV: I managed for the Mets for two years in '66 and '67, then I coached for the Pirates for four years ('68-'71) before I became manager for them.

WL: Well, you took over at a good time. Either everything was set or you knew how to handle it.

BV: No, I was fortunate. We had a good club. Murtaugh had just won a World Championship with that club I took over in '72. I'm not so sure we didn't have a better club in '72 than in '71. We just didn't win the final games.

WL: If I remember right, you led Cincinnati in the playoff, 2 games to 1, and lost both of the last two in the last innings.

BV: No, the fourth game we got beat 7-1, or something like that. But in the final game we had a lead in the bottom of the ninth. That's when Giusti gave up a home run that tied the score, and then Moose made the wild pitch that let the winning run score. But Giusti had given us some great pitching for several seasons. It doesn't matter how good you are. If somebody hits one on you, that's part of it. Everybody's going to lose one once in a while. On given days he may not be throwing as hard or as well as other times. Those really hard throwers, if they have to go more than two innings or so, they'll often get in trouble.

WL: That was quite a lineup you had in '72. That was Clemente's last season.

BV: Yes, and he got his 3000th hit right at the end of the season, his last hit.

WL: You had some pretty good bombers, with Stargell, ~~Ellis~~ Clemente, Oliver, and Hebner. And some pretty good guys on the mound with Blass, Ellis, Briles, Moose, Kison, and Gisuti.

BV: I think that pitching staff was a good bit better than everybody realized. Besides those pitchers you mention we backed them up with Ramon Hernandez from

the Dominican. A lefthanded reliever and lefthanded batters just could not hit him.

WL: Well, in '73 they brought Murtaugh back as manager toward the end of the of year. And Blass began to have his troubles in that year, didn't he?

BV: Well, he started the year having his troubles. From day one he was in trouble. It really started in spring training.

WL: Now, when you left them near the end of the season, were you already in contact with the Yankees?

BV: No. That all materialized a little out of the ordinary for the simple reason they had already hired Dick Williams to be their manager. That's when he got into trouble with Charlie Finley over his contract, and the Commissioner ruled he couldn't break that contract. So that left an opening late in the winter, and most possibilities were already employed. I just happened to be at the right time. I'd already agreed to go to Denver to manage there for Houston.

WL: And in that '74 season you didn't miss a division title by much, finishing two games behind Baltimore.

BV: No, we challenged all the way. We had a good bunch of ball players, many of them young and people didn't know much about them.

WL: Was Nettles as good a third baseman as Brooks Robinson?

BV: Well, I can't compare them. I never saw Robinson play except in his last seasons. I think probably there wasn't much difference. Maybe Brooks might have been a bit faster. But at third base it didn't mean that much. They both knew what to do with the ball.

WL: How was Bobby Murcer? I never thought he lived up to his potential?

BV: Well, Bobby was a good player. I thought he was misplaced as a center fielder. He was brought up as Mantle's replacement and built up, and Bobby has never liked me to this day because I took him out of center field and put ~~in~~ him in right. He was an excellent right fielder. That's neither here nor there as to whether he likes me or not. I did what I felt I had to do. He also was better suited for Yankee Stadium than he was for Shea Stadium.

WL: Was Steinbrenner the Yankee owner in '75? Did he bring Billy in to replace you?

BV: Yes, he was there both years I was, but he was suspended all the time I was there, so I didn't really have too many dealings with him. I had some, and I know what he's all about.

WL: Catfish Hunter was with you in '75.

BV: Yes, that was a pleasure. He was a good pitcher. A good person.

WL: At that point, how was Bobby Bonds?

BV: I thought Bobby was a player who should have been a bit better. I thought his talent was excellent. A good player and a good person. I had no problems. He overswung a lot, and struck out a lot more than he should have. But that was his nature and the way he played. You could win with Bobby, and he was an all-around player, he could do it all. I just thought he could have been a little bit better.

WL: Is Barry Bonds going to be better?
going to be

BV: Barry is/an excellent player. He has basically the same tools his dad had, except for throwing. Barry's arm is just average. Because of his arm, he's better in left field than center.

WL: You took over the Astros toward the end of the '75 season. You had J.R. Richard?

BV: Yes, he was just starting. He had a great respect for authority. I never felt that he resented anything that I said or asked him to do or corrected him on, or whatever. That was all over and above the fact that he was the best pitcher in the business.

WL: How did you like the Astrodome?

BV: I enjoyed it, for the simple reason it was ideal for that climate in Houston. You couldn't beat it.

WL: In '76 you brought the Astros in to a 3rd place finish. How was Larry Dierker?

BV: At that point he had lost some of his real strength. He was a real power pitcher. But he had a little arm trouble. He came back and was a pretty good pitcher, winning at least as many games as he lost.

WL: Was José Cruz a polished player when he came to Houston?

BV: No. When he came to Houston he was what I'd call a real wild swinger.

With us he learned to control that swing a good deal. He didn't do it when he first started. He came to Houston prior to my going down there, at the start of the '75 season. I came in August. I started playing him when I got down there. The next year and thereafter he played regularly. And I credit himself and Deacon Jones for the adjustment he made. He became a real good hitter. Deacon Jones was the hitting instructor.

WL: And I think Joaquin Andujar came up while you were there.

BV: Yes, he did.

WL: Was he as unpredictable or whatever you want to call it then as he is now?

BV: I would think he hasn't changed all that much.

WL: The following year you finished third again, and Joe Niekro joined you.

BV: Joe was a good pitcher by the time he came to us.

WL: As good a pitcher as Phil?

BV: I think so. I don't think you can compare his career with Phil's, but for a few seasons, yes. Around 1980 Joe was tough. He not only was a good pitcher, he was a good athlete. He did everything well.

WL: You also had Floyd Bannister then, in his early years in the majors.

BV: I always thought he had great stuff, he just didn't throw enough strikes. For whatever reasons I didn't think he was wild. I just thought he didn't throw the ball over the plate enough.

WL: In '79, when you finished second, how was Sambito when he came up?

BV: Young, hard-throwing lefthander that could throw strikes. He had some very good years for us. Then he came up with an arm problem just when he could have made real big money.

WL: Do relievers suffer more from overworked arms than starters do? It seems like the great bulk of relievers have two or three real good seasons and then they're about through.

BV: Yeah, I think ~~they have~~ that's the reason. They have to use their arm so much. Even though they don't throw as many innings, they're up and down so much. And the pressure. Any time they're pitching everything's on the line.

WL: Jeff Leonard had lots of promise and potential right from the beginning, didn't he?

BV: Yes, he did. Would you say that last year he sort of reached his potential?

BV: Yeah, I think so. He's capable of doing a lot of things, and I don't know that he really surprised anybody ~~xxxx~~ by doing it.

WL: He had the reputation of being a little difficult to get along with.

BV: He's changed since I had him. I don't mean that he's changed in that respect. He was having problems with alcohol when I had him. It wasn't an obvious thing nor a situation where he was creating all sorts of problems. He wasn't. I had no problems with him. But I think the fact that he got straightened out, got his life back in order, then his ability started coming to the front. As far as being hard to get along with, I can't comment, because I never had the problem with him.

WL: Well, in '80 you came in first in the NL West and lost that playoff to the Phillies, 3 games to 2.

BV: We were leading in the 8th inning by three runs in the third game.

We were leading in the fourth game, 2-1....

WL: That's right. And they tied it in the ~~bottom of the~~ 9th. No, in the 8th.

In fact, they went ahead by one in the ~~bottom of the~~ 8th and you tied it in the bottom ~~the top~~ of the 9th, and they won it in the 10th. Then, in the fifth game you led, 5-2, in the top of the 8th before they got five runs. You tied it 7-all in the bottom of that inning, but they won it in the 10th. Interesting that four of the five games went into extra innings, with Houston winning the first two and Philadelphia the other two.

BV: ~~That fourth game~~ It's strange, You can talk about all those games and all the things that happened, that was one of the damndest games you ever want to see.

It was similar to the 7th game of the '60 Series between Pittsburgh and New York, with the lead going back and forth and all the runs scoring. The whole thing ended up hinging on a bad hop single in the 10th inning over Bergman' head.

I don't remember who hit it, but somebody hit a ground ball to first base and

he went over to get it and it took a bad hop. Hit the dirt and then over his head. Then they sacrificed him along and got a base hit to score the winning run.

WL: Well, World Series have been lost on bad hops, like in 1924.

BV: Nobody ever remembers the bad hop.

WL: In '84 you had Jeff Reardon for a time with you in Montreal. Did he show the promise he has later developed?

BV: He had pitched well prior to my going up there. Whether it was my fault or somebody else's, he did not have good years for me.

WL: I see that I skipped over '83.

BV: I attributed some of it to the fact he had some back problems. He still has back problems. And, me being new there and him having back problems, maybe I didn't treat it just right; I don't know. Anyway, he did not pitch too well. But I still liked him. He liked to get the ball, liked to pitch, and I liked him personally. I don't think he really thought I did. It's strange how managers and players sometimes cross wires. He wasn't always sure about me. But, you know, you do what you have to do and what you feel is right. I thought his control got better later on. He was throwing the breaking ball over the plate.

WL: When you went to Montreal, I think John McHale was president.

BV: Yes. One of the nicest people I ever worked with. I really thought John was too good for his own good. I don't mean that critically. I just mean that he was so good I'm sure some people took advantage of him.

WL: How was Steve Rogers to handle?

BV: I don't know that anybody really handled Steve Rogers. I had no problem with him and he was a good pitcher. But Steve was his own man and he did his own thing. He was a good pitcher. I don't know what else I can say. For several years he was a winner.

WL: Charlie Lea?

BV: One of the best competitors I've ever worked with. One of the best pitchers I've ever worked with.

WL: Think he's going to make a comeback?

BV: I hope so. I've really got my fingers crossed for him. One of the pleasures of my business was being able to have him on my club. And I really hated it because he had a sore arm. It happened right at the wrong time for him.

WL: What about Dawson, Raines, Carter, and Wallach?

BV: Dawson's one of the best people I ever worked with, Raines and Wallach too. Carter is a good person, good player, talks too much. You can't talk that much without getting yourself in trouble. Anyway, I had no kicks with Gary. I got along with him and he produced. I like him, but he does talk too much. You give him a mike, he'll talk all day.

WL: Since '84, having you been working with the Pirates every spring?

BV: No. I worked with the Cardinals the first spring, 1985. Went to spring training with the Cardinals, with Whitey, and worked with the outfielders. Then, during the course of the summer, and I hadn't planned on doing it, I got a call from Lee Thomas, the Cards' farm director, and he wanted me to work with the hitters in the organization on four clubs. Of course, I'd just got away from that moving around all the time. I thought about it for awhile, and he didn't have anybody else to do it, and so I said yes. One club was in Little Rock, another in Springfield, IL, and a third in Louisville, and the fourth was in St. Petersburg. They were all fairly close by. I agreed to make three trips to each club, stay three or days each place, see all the guys, work with him. Then the next year, Syd Thrift and Jim Leyland called me and asked me to coach for the Pirates. I didn't plan on doing that, either. That's how I got back into the Pirate organization. I coached a full year for them - '86. Since then I've worked with their outfielders in the spring.

WL: What was your greatest thrill in baseball?

BV: Playing and being a part of the '60 club. I don't just mean the Series, I'm talking about the whole season. The things that happened, why they happened, and the way it all turned out. I don't think you could even visualize anything better happening to you. Unless you happen to be a 25-game winner and a Cy Young winner. That's something else. That particular year and experience was the best.

WL: Can you identify your best game, the one you most remember?

BV: I had a doubleheader in Brooklyn with the Pirates in '56 when I went 7 for 9. We didn't win both games, I think we split. In fact, in '56 we didn't win many games in Brooklyn. That was the year for them. Another game I recall well was the 4th game of the '60 Series. I drove in the winning run and made a play in the outfield that cut off the would-be tying run - both in the same game.

WL: How do you explain that you came up in your first season as a home run hitter and never did much thereafter in that regard?

BV: The park.

WL: Sportsman's Park?

BV: Yeah. Short right field fence. The year before I played in Rochester, which had an identical park, and I hit 22 there. I had never hit more than six anywhere else.

WL: Who was the hardest pitcher for you to hit?

BV: Oh, I think the ~~best~~ best pitcher over the years was Koufax. I didn't really mind facing him, he just overpowered you. I could see the ball and I could see when he was throwing the breaking ball. But the curve was so good and the fastball had so much hop on it, you just had a tough time controlling the bat. I think career-wise, Spahn was the best pitcher I saw.

WL: Was the best team you played on the '60 Pirates?

BV: (Pause) Yeah. That was the best club I played on.

WL: The best team you managed?

BV: '72 Pirates. I don't like to take away from the other clubs I had, but just all-around that was the best club I had.

WL: Best memory all-told out of baseball?

BV: Winning it all back in '60. I don't know how you could beat that, really. Unless you could do over and over again, as some people have been fortunate enough to do.

WL: Baseball today. How do you regard free agency?

BV: It probably had to come sooner or later. In some ways I don't think it's

been good, but in some others it has. I think the fact that you take away players that the fans have become accustomed to and then all of a sudden they're gone, that hurts ~~the~~ to some extent. But it certainly hasn't hurt attendance.

I think it has hurt the financial position of the owners in baseball.

WL: Well, it happens only because of TV revenue. Without it there couldn't be the incredible salaries, arbitration, etc.

BV: But I don't blame free agency for that. You know who I blame? The owners.

WL: Oh, sure. How about arbitration?

BV: I think it's a bad thing.

BV: The part I think is bad about it is that the people who have to rule on the arbitration cases aren't baseball people and make some poor decisions as a result.

WL: How about long-term, guaranteed, no-trade, no-cut contracts?

BV: Foolish. In our business it's follish. But I still don't blame anybody but the owners. It's not the players' fault.

WL: How about artificial turf? You played on it some, didn't you?

BV: No, I never played on it. The last year I played was '65 and it came in '66. I think the artificial surface is a necessity in some cases. With climate considerations, overlapping schedules in different sports, etc., it's needed.

WL: But you admit it modifies the game somewhat?

BV: Baseball wasn't made to be played on it, true. But you learn to deal with it.

WL: Are you at all upset by the fact that almost every new ball park in the past 20 years or so is almost identical with the others?

BV: No, that hasn't upset me in the least. Realistically, it's probably better this way, for then you can compare records and performances, etc. Now, to back off a little bit, I'll say there were a number of unique ball parks that created a great deal of interest in our game, and you'd like to have them back.

WL: What do you feel about the strike zone shrinking, as it has in recent times:

BV: I think it's too small. The area designated in the rules ought to be enforced.

BV: The difference in thinking between one league and the other is ridiculous.

WL: Is the uproar over balks anything to worry about?

BV: No. It's a matter of the pitchers adjusting. They just have to do it.

WL: If there wasn't so much base stealing these days, it probably wouldn't be an issue at all.

BV: Probably not, but base stealing is a big part of our game right now.

It's an exciting part of our business. As soon as the pitchers learn to come to a stop, then it won't be a problem any more. In fact, I was a little bit surprised that they started applying the rule so vigorously at the opening of the season. I figured they would try to stop it all in spring training, get them back on an even keel, and then relax a bit on it. But they haven't.

WL: Any predictions for the division winners this year?

BV: My predictions wouldn't be any better than anybody else's. I like certain clubs. I like Cincinnati, I think they and Houston and San Francisco will have a pretty good race. The East could be surprising. That might be a tough race. The Mets have the best club. St. Louis is going to be down some, especially early in the season. Pittsburgh is improved, I think Philadelphia is better.

WL: Isn't that Pittsburgh resurrection a remarkable thing?

BV: It's hard to believe that it happened that quick.

WL: Does Syd Thrift deserve all the credit he's getting?

BV: No. Thrift gets more credit than he should get. I worked for him, so be careful what you say. I don't mean to take any credit away from Syd Thrift, what I mean to do is give Jim Leyland more credit than he's getting.

WL: Every now and then a manager comes up out of the coaching ranks and surprises the baseball world, but it takes him a few years to get the credit for it.

BV: Well, for '88 I think Pittsburgh is a possible NL East winner, but I really think they are a year away. They're going to be outstanding in '89. That's my feeling, but I hope I'm a year wrong.

~~WL~~ WL: Well, anything else about baseball that you want to add?

BV: It's a good game. An excellent ~~mi~~ game. I can't say enough about it, it's been

awfully good to me. I've been in it since 1950 - 38 years. I'm not that active now but I still keep my finger in the pie enough to keep the juices flowing. A lot of people have asked me what's the difference in baseball as compared with the past. I say that the teams as a whole aren't as good as they used to be (because of the rise of other pro sports), but your game is basically as good or better, and your top talent is as good or better. The number of teams has almost doubled, requiring nearly twice as many players on the big league level, and baseball has lost much of the best talent to other sports. Actually, your best athletes aren't all in baseball by a whole lot, but that doesn't seem to hurt our game. One reason it doesn't is that baseball now does an excellent job of training its players, much better than in the past.

WL: I imagine you are opposed to the DH?

BV: Oh, no! I do think both leagues ought to have the same setup. I personally like the game's better with the DH than without it, for the basic baseball fan. Now for the old timer and the diehard baseball fan who loves strategy and maneuvering, the DH is anathema. But there aren't too many of us around. The DH gives you better defense, because one more player is automatically in the game; you have better offense, because the DH is always a better hitter than the pitcher; your better pitchers get to pitch a bit more, since they don't need to be taken out for a pinch hitter late in the game if they're a run or two behind; and you get better defensive plays with another good hitter in the lineup, because your best plays are not made against poor hitting pitchers. The best plays are made against guys that drives the ball and hits it hard, etc. Those are good reasons, I think, for the DH. It makes for a better game.

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