

Tom Paciorek

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2008. Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2008.

He only played for the White Sox in 376 games but his influence was felt for almost 15 years on the South Side. Tom Paciorek went from the playing field into the broadcast booth forming a legendary duo with Ken “Hawk” Harrelson. The two combined wit, expertise and at times outright humor in broadcasting games for almost a decade.

One of the most popular players to ever wear a White Sox uniform, “Wimpy” always had time for the fans and was also one of the first to volunteer for charitable events and functions promoting the franchise throughout the area.

A blue-collar guy from the Detroit area, Paciorek was a top defensive back at the University of Houston and was drafted by the Miami Dolphins. Football could have been in his future but his first love was baseball and he signed with the Dodgers in what may have been the single greatest draft by a franchise in history, in 1968. The 1972 minor league Player of the Year never could crack the loaded Los Angeles lineup and he was traded to Atlanta in the “Dusty” Baker deal before the 1976 season.

Finally, in May 1978 he signed with the expansion Seattle Mariners franchise where he hit his stride making the All-Star team in 1981. A contract dispute landed him with the White Sox in a deal before the 1982 season. In both 1982 and 1983 he hit over .300 and was one of the veterans on the 1983 “Winnin’ Ugly” club that stormed through the American League Western Division like Sherman through Georgia. Traded to the Mets in July 1985 he finished his career in Texas before joining the White Sox television team.

Paciorek was at his home outside Atlanta when he spoke with me about his days in Chicago. The conversation was honest with many humorous recollections as well as some candid remembrances of what went right and what went wrong with the White Sox as well as insight into the business of broadcasting Major League baseball.

ML: Tom you were one of the first stars of the Mariners franchise which was still very young when you played for them, and the promotional work that you did is the stuff of legend. How did you feel about getting traded to the White Sox?

(Author’s Note: Paciorek played four years in Seattle making the All-Star team in 1981. His wacky commercials for the franchise are some of the funniest baseball material ever seen. If you ever get the chance to view any of them, by all means take a look. Paciorek came to the Sox on December 11, 1981 for Jim Essian, Rod Allen and Todd Cruz.)

TP: With the Mariners guys like me and Bruce Bochte would go to the Fred Meyer *(Author’s Note: A store with numerous locations in the Pacific Northwest)* and we’d greet fans and literally

give away stuff like jackets, pennants, caps. But a lot of times even though the stuff was free the fans wouldn't take it, that's what we were dealing with! (laughing)

As far as my trade to the White Sox that happened after I went to the winter meetings which were in Florida that year. I caught up with Tommy Lasorda who was my manager in the minor leagues for a long time. I was there to negotiate a new deal with Seattle; it would be for three years and increase my salary from 60,000 to 250,000 thousand dollars, a tremendous amount of money for that time. But I guess being with Tommy and a lot of my friends just confused me a bit and I actually turned down the offer. That got the owner, George Argyros angry, and he said something like 'I'll fix him.

I was actually traded to the White Sox while I was flying back to Seattle. I just got off the plane when I got a call from a Chicago reporter asking me how I felt. I didn't even know what he was talking about until he told me. I was shocked but I understood how baseball worked. I wound up getting a better deal from the Sox and it worked out for the best.

ML: That off season the Sox also acquired All-Star Steve Kemp to go along with established guys like Carlton Fisk, Greg Luzinski and Harold Baines. They had some good young arms in Britt Burns, LaMarr Hoyt and Rich Dotson; did you think the club's future was pointed up?

TP: Oh yeah. We had a good team and don't forget the contributions of Jerry Koosman. He was just incredible. Even at his age he could still throw hard. I bet you right now he could go out and still throw. He could do anything you needed a pitcher to do...start, close, work long relief, anything.

ML: You hit .312 that year and heading into 1983 a lot of fans were optimistic that this was going to be the Sox year, especially after getting Floyd Bannister in the free agent market. Yet the club started off very slowly, by mid-May they were seven under and the talk was swirling around Tony LaRussa's firing. Again why the slow start especially coming off a 20-7 spring training record.

TP: Boy you know I didn't even remember what our record was in spring training that year until you told me. Sometimes no matter how much talent you have it just takes a while to get started. But once we kicked it into gear we were a very good team.

ML: You personally had some awkward moments early that season, you weren't playing much and basically issued a trade warning saying, "if the White Sox don't want a .300 hitter, somebody else will. This ain't exactly the 1927 Yankees, I want out." I assume that was just frustration on your part.

TP: Wow...I said that? Honestly I don't remember saying that. I did say that "Tony (LaRussa) couldn't manage a fruit stand! Yes, it was just frustration on my part, I wasn't playing much early in the season. It was a stupid thing to say. Tony wasn't real happy about it and I don't

blame him. I regret making those kind of comments and I owned up to it with him. I apologized for it. It was said in a weak moment and it was wrong.

ML: Speaking of Tony he was still very young at the time, what was it like playing for him?

TP: I enjoyed playing for Tony. He was a good manager and he had good presence with the team. A lot of it was that he was about the same age as a lot of the guys and he could deal with the players. He was good offensively, he was gutsy, and I think he's gotten better over time which is why he's going to go into the Hall of Fame someday.

ML: One thing I heard Ken "Hawk" Harrelson say was that in 1983 Tony didn't become paranoid over the talk about his firing or the slow start; he just kept doing his job. "Hawk" also said that was a key to the season because in his words, "when the manager becomes paranoid, that filters right down the bench." Did you and the other players still really believe you could dig yourself out of that early hole?

TP: Oh yea, you never doubt yourself and with the team we had...we had a lot of veteran guys, guys with character who played hard. If you didn't win the game it wasn't the end of the world, you think about it for an hour or so and then go right back out the next day.

ML: Having interviewed some of your teammate's one thing they all told me was how close the 83' White Sox were.

TP: We'd sit around in the locker room for an hour or so after the game and talk. We'd also have parties on the road trips where we'd be able to get together. That's something that's changed today. As soon as the game's over guys just leave. The money players are making today is part of the reason for that.

ML: Right around June you got in the lineup regularly and with that inside / out swing of yours started drilling hits all over the park. Was it simply the fact that you were now basically playing every day and usually at first base? *(Author's Note: Tom finished the season at .307 with 32 doubles, three triples, nine home runs and 63 RBI's usually hitting third.)*

TP: At the start of the year I just wasn't swinging well. I went back to my stance where I crouched down. It got me seeing the ball better. The other thing that happened was the team brought in Harvey Misel. *(Author's Note: Misel had worked with previous Sox players like Steve Stone and Eric Soderholm in the late 1970's)* Harvey really helped me focus better and he gave you a lot of positive reinforcement. I had more confidence when I went up to the plate. I used breathing exercises as well to help relax. I was happy and that let me play better.

ML: Julio Cruz came at the trade deadline *(Author's Note: for Tony Bernazard)*. What did he bring to the table?

TP: Julio brought a real defensive presence. He was also one of the fastest guys in the Major Leagues. He was a slap hitter and when he and Rudy Law got on base it created a lot of opportunities for us. They'd steal bases, put the pressure on the opposition, and force them to

make mistakes. He'd be hitting down in the order and was like a second lead-off guy for us. *(Author's Note: That season Cruz would end up with 24 steals with the Sox, over 50 on the year. Law had 77 giving the club the best one-two punch in the game.)*

ML: By the All-Star break the Sox were at 40-37, three and a half behind Texas but before we talk about the second half, I wanted to ask you about something that would have long term implications for you. The day before the game at Comiskey Park, an Old Timers Game was held and it turned out that you were in the broadcast booth with your friend Lorn Brown, the first time according to Lorn, you had ever done something like that. How did that happen?

TP: Honestly all I remember is that someone asked me to do it. I was going to be in town over the break and figured it would be fun. They stuck us in a little cubicle since Comiskey Park never had the facilities. It was a lot of fun and I enjoyed working with Lorn. We got along great and are still friends to this day.

ML: Now back to the season, to say the Sox got hot in the second half would be a gross understatement. Literally it seems the entire team was on fire. 55-15 starting on August 1 with a 4-1 win over the Yankees. Have you ever been around a team in any capacity to pull off a run like that?

TP: Never. 55-15? That's pretty amazing. It got to the point later in the year we had won something like 17 straight games at Comiskey Park and when we finally got beat we sat around the locker room afterwards saying 'how did we lose that game?' I mean every time we showed up at the park we expected to win the game. It was that simple.

And we enjoyed playing at home. The place was really rocking every night. It was really fun to play in front of the Sox fans. It was a fan friendly place.

ML: With the park packed every night was that something that you and the guys fed off of?

TP: Sure, playing before those types of fans really inspired you. They were into the game. Of course if you were playing bad you could feel the negative energy too!

ML: What were your emotions on the night of September 17 when the Sox beat Seattle to clinch the division? *(Author's Note: Paciorek had gotten into 85 games with 175 at bats in 1974 when the Dodgers went to the World Series, but 1983 was the first time he made the post season as a full time contributor.)*

TP: It was great. I mean we knew we were going to win it, it was just a matter of time but when it happened the emotion and the celebration was fantastic. The night we clinched I remember most of the guys stayed out all night, and then we had to come to the park the next day for an afternoon game. *(Author's Note: Fortunately for Tom and the rest of his teammates roughly half of the usual starters sat out the game, which the Sox still won 6-0 behind Rich Dotson. Harold Baines and Mike Squires each had two RBI's.)*

ML: Tom the Sox had played so well for so long it was absolutely gut wrenching what happened in the playoffs when the club was held to three runs in four games and to have Britt Burns pitch the way he did in Game #4 only to lose. To this day can you explain what happened?

TP: When you don't play a lot of meaningful games mentally you lose the edge and I think that's what happened to us. Not taking anything away from Baltimore but we clinched so early that the last few weeks we didn't have to play as hard. When you look back we could have won the World Series because we were better than Philadelphia.

The other thing was this was back when you played a best three of five in the first round and the pressure is so much greater in a series like that then in a best four of seven. Usually in a longer series the best team wins but in a short series, you make one mistake, lose one game, have an injury and you could be in serious trouble.

And there was something else that I don't think a lot of people realize. There was a lot of pressure on us to win because of what was happening to a few of our coaches, our beloved hitting coach Charlie Lau and Lorn Babe. Both of those guys were having health issues and we didn't know frankly if they were going to be with us next season. I remember sitting in the locker room after Baltimore clinched against us and feeling awful that we let those two guys down. *(Author's Note: Both Lau and Babe would pass away from cancer before the start of the 1984 season.)*

ML: Going into 1984 the Sox were everybody's favorites, they added Tom Seaver to the rotation yet the club started out cold again, 8-13 after April. By the All-Star break though you'd won seven straight and 10 of 12 to be in first place by a game at 44-40. This time though in the second half the club fell apart, unlike 1983. I've had some guys tell me that the team quit. That may be a little strong but how could a team that talented fall apart like that?

TP: That was a bad year. Tom Seaver was a great guy in the clubhouse but I just think we missed Jerry Koosman so much that year. That's not taking anything away from Ron Reed whom we got in a trade for Jerry but we missed him. Jerry was so good as a team guy that not seeing him in the clubhouse day after day hurt us.

ML: Of course one game that does stand out was the 25 inning game with Milwaukee on May 8 and 9. It's the longest game time wise *(Author's Note: 8:06)* in MLB history. You had five hits in the game won on a home run by Harold Baines. What's it like playing in a game that long?

TP: I guess it turned out that was the high point of the season. I certainly remember that game because I didn't start it yet still had five hits. I was actually eating pizza in the umpires' dressing room when one of the clubhouse guys told me I had to go in the game for Ron Kittle.

"Kitty" came down with a migraine. I asked the guy when I was needed and he said something like 'you're up next!' I flew into the dugout and had pizza sauce all over my uniform top. I struck out on three pitches and remember thinking, 'hell, Kittle could have done that!'

ML: When a game goes that long is that one of the situations where the guys look at one another and say something like, ‘this game has gone so long we damn well better win it!’

TP: Sure but remember when a game goes that long not only do you get tired physically but mentally it starts to bother you, you just get so drained. If you look at box scores of long games you see that usually the longer a game goes the harder it is to score any runs no matter who’s pitching. Although in this game I think Milwaukee scored then we came back to score and tie it up before Harold won it. *(Author’s Note: Tom’s memory is correct. The Brewers scored two in the 9th with the Sox coming back to tie it in the bottom of the frame. Milwaukee then scored three in the 21st inning before the Sox came back yet again, with three to retie the contest.)*

ML: By 1985 it seemed like the team was in transition, I think you had some injuries and in July were traded to the Mets. Was it time for a change...since you seemed pretty happy in Chicago.

TP: I wasn’t playing well and was actually designated for assignment before the Sox worked out a deal with the Mets. *(Author’s Note: On July 16 Paciorek went to the Mets for Dave Cochrane.)* And that was fine, I got a chance to play on a team that won 98 games and saw “Doc” Gooden in his prime. *(Author’s Note: Despite winning that many games the Mets missed the post season because the Cardinals won 101 games and the division crown.)*

ML: In that same year didn’t you do a little broadcasting work for the Sox while you were injured?

TP: Actually that was the year before 1984, I broke my hand and it was either Don Drysdale or “Hawk” who couldn’t make the broadcast so I was asked to fill in. It was a double header in Baltimore and we lost both games so I guess I was a jinx. *(Author’s Note: Tom is probably talking about the twin bill on July 12 right after the All Star break. The Sox lost 2-1 and 3-0.)*

ML: In 1988 you joined John Rooney in the TV booth for Sox games on a regular basis. How did you get the job?

TP: That was because Eddie Einhorn *(Author’s Note: White Sox co-owner)* thought I’d be a good fit for the position. The year before when I was with Texas we were in Chicago and Eddie and I had lunch. He asked me if I’d be interested and I said sure. Eddie was one of the few guys around who really understood both the business of baseball and broadcasting, I mean he was the guy who put together the legendary basketball game between UCLA and Houston at the Astrodome. I was at that game by the way.

(Author’s Note: The “Game of the Century” was played on January 20, 1968 in front of over 52 thousand fans. It marked the first time a regular season college basketball game was nationally televised in prime time. Houston behind Elvin Hayes beat UCLA and Lew Alcindor 71-69 ending the Bruins 47 game winning streak. Einhorn was the executive producer for the TVS television network. Later on Einhorn would also be executive producer of the national telecasts for the World Football League and would be on the broadcasting committee for MLB.)

ML: In 1990 the TV crew was you, Jim Durham and “Hawk” Harrelson. Then in 1991 it was you and “Hawk” and that remained the TV team until the end of the 1999 season. Tom, I’ve heard a lot of talk and rumors about why you left the Sox. Can you give us the straight truth about why after 12 years you were gone?

TP: I always looked at a broadcasting team exactly the same way I did when I was playing. It had to be a team effort to get the job done. It was a situation where “Hawk” and I were losing it from a chemistry standpoint the last few years. There were also some personal issues pending in the Atlanta area and it was difficult to take care of them when I was traveling around all the time. I was glad that I decided to make the move although I regretted leaving a lot of great people that I worked with.

I don’t like to watch or listen to myself but when I decided to try for the Nationals TV job I had to put together a tape so I watched some of the games from when “Hawk” and I were working together and I’ve got to tell you we were really good.

ML: While I’m thinking of it how did you get the nickname “Wimpy?”

TP: That’s from when I was with the Dodgers. I signed with L.A. in 1968 and you look at the guys the Dodgers drafted just that year...Steve Garvey, Bill Buckner, Davey Lopes, Bill Russell, Ron Cey...that may have been the single greatest draft in baseball history. All of us came up together and in the minor leagues we’d eat together. When we’d go out guys would always be getting steak but I’d always order a hamburger so I got that nickname. That’s from the Popeye cartoons; he had a friend “Wimpy,” who always wanted hamburgers.

ML: You’ve also worked for the Tigers, Braves and Nationals and I’m wondering about your thoughts on the business of broadcasting. Lorn Brown made the observation that today broadcasters are being hired by marketing people and not by baseball men and he thinks that’s a real issue.

TP: I think there are a lot of people who are totally clueless about the game in the business now. There are no more Eddie Einhorn’s out there. I see people being hired for positions and I’m totally amazed.

Let me tell you about how stupid some of these people are. When I was with the Braves, it was opening day; we were in Miami playing the Marlins. For the pre-game show we had a conversation with Bobby Cox and Bobby showed a totally different face than what you usually see. We had material on Tim Hudson who was pitching in a simulated game and I had capsule summaries of the seven rookies that made the roster. It was a really well done show by everybody. So the show just ends and I get a call from one of the producers. He tells me, “So and so just called. He wants you to remove that lapel pin.” I was wearing a pin promoting cancer awareness. I asked the producer, “Did he even watch the show?” and the guy told me, “probably not.” That’s the kind of people that you have to deal with.

Before I got the Washington job working with Bob Carpenter, I met with some of those folks and they told me that they liked my work but they had heard that I didn’t want to promote the team

that I was working for. That's the kind of lies that you have in the business. I mean come on, I *loved* being with the fans, signing autographs, talking baseball.

I loved working with Bob and the Nationals that was about as much fun as I've ever had in the business. Tony Tavares hired me, a baseball guy but I found out during the year that Don Sutton started snooping around. Stan Kasten worked with Don for a number of years in Atlanta and he owed him a favor. As soon as I heard Sutton wanted to come to Washington, I knew it was inevitable. I told people that I wouldn't be asked back this year and that's what happened. But the thing is when the Nationals told me I wasn't going to be back they said they 'wanted to go in another direction.' I've been in this game as a player and broadcaster for 39 years. I think I earned the right to be told why I wasn't being asked back. That was totally gutless on their part. (*Author's Note: Sutton did in fact become the new television analyst for Washington this year.*)

ML: So would you like to get back in the game in some capacity?

TP: I don't think I want to work anymore. It's not because I don't like the guys and I love being around the fans, the grounds-keepers but I'm just tired of the BS and the incompetence that won't allow baseball people to handle the game.

ML: One of the other things we talked about in passing was what was going on with some of the broadcasters themselves today. You mentioned something about listening to a game on satellite radio and hearing the announcers try to make one liners during an important part of the game. The inference was that the timing was bad, can you explain further?

TP: Especially when it's a critical time of the game. This club that I was listening to was down to their final out and the radio guys are trying to one up each other. "Hawk" and I would always tell stories, that's part of the game, but there's an *appropriate* time to tell stories. It's hard to even fathom what some of these guys are thinking about sometimes.

ML: So what does Tom Paciorek do now-a-days?

TP: Basically I baby sit my five grandkids! (laughing). In fact, right now while we're talking I'm playing catch with my grandson. He's seven years old and reminds me of myself so much it's scary! We even have the same birthday! All of the family is in the Atlanta area so I get to see them a lot and spend time with them.

ML: Tom your stay in Chicago as either a player or broadcaster lasted 15 years, that's a long time. Can you sum up the time spent on the South Side?

TP: I'll tell you what some of the happiest days of my life were spent in Chicago. I've always said it's the best city in the country. There's so much to do there, I mean from a cultural standpoint, for sports, the people are great. I'm so thankful I had the opportunity to spend time there and I still get the chance to see Sox fans because I work the Sox Fantasy Camp every January which is a lot of fun.

