

Walt Williams

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in February 2010.
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He was all of five feet, six inches tall. Yet his heart was as big as a man six feet, five inches tall. That heart and his unwillingness to settle for anything less than his best were the reasons why Walt Williams was able to carve himself out a solid 10 year career in the big leagues, six of which were spent with the White Sox.

He was a part of two of the most well-known clubs in team history, the 1967 “Near-Miss” White Sox and the 1972 “Outhouse to Penthouse” White Sox. He was also one of the better players on the dreary clubs that had some of the worst years in franchise history during the period from 1968 through 1970.

(Author’s Note: The second club so named by Sox outfielder Rick Reichardt who asked if they were going to be in the “Outhouse or Penthouse” when all was said and done during an interview.)

Williams was loved by Sox fans that identified with his hustle and his drive to be great. His style wasn’t an act; he was the American League’s version of Pete Rose. Williams ran to first base on a walk, he ran to his position in the outfield, he ran from his position back to the dugout, he ran out every ground ball, every pop out. He played every game like it would be his last and did it with a joy that appealed to Sox fans that often had to work hard themselves for their livings. They identified with Williams and his fight just to get to the big leagues, let alone stay in it.

I had the chance to talk baseball with Walt in February...the time of the year when players, managers and coaches are getting ready to head to spring training and fans are starting to count down the days until opening day. Walt is living in Texas and has stayed busy; he’s a scratch golfer, plays practically every morning then goes off to work in the afternoon as the head of the Brownwood, Texas recreation center. Life is good for the man Sox Hall of Fame broadcaster, Bob Elson used to call with respect, “Little Walter...”

ML: Walt you played a few games with Houston, got traded to the Cardinals and never played a game in the major leagues for them. Then you’re traded to the White Sox before the start of the 1967 season. Tell me about your reaction to the deal.

(Author’s Note: Williams and pitcher Don Dennis came to the Sox for catcher Johnny Romano and minor leaguer Lee White)

WW: I vaguely remember hearing about the deal when I was in my apartment. It didn’t matter to me where I went, because the Cardinals had guys like Lou Brock and Curt Flood in the outfield and I wasn’t going to get a real chance. I was looking forward to the opportunity with the White Sox. I knew they needed some outfielders and I felt the way I played the game would give me the chance to make the club.

ML: Obviously you did something right that spring training because manager Eddie Stanky had you on the opening day roster despite the fact you had very little experience in the big leagues. What was it that you did to impress him?

WW: Being around Eddie was such a blessing for me. I think what it was, was that he played the game the way I did. He was a hard-nosed player, a guy who did everything he could to win a game and I think he saw the same things in me. I liked talking to him about the game; he really taught me about baseball...he was the first person to take the time to do that. He put me in the right place and allowed me to get the best out of my abilities.

When I was growing up in San Francisco I never thought I'd have the chance to make it in the game, baseball wasn't even my favorite sport as a kid. I played it because it was the thing to do at the time. I grew up poor, I was the youngest of nine kids, I didn't have a dad growing up and I had to compete for everything that I got. It was the same way when I played. Anybody that I was working for was going to get 100 per cent of my best effort...that's the way I was when I played and I'm still that way.

ML: I've heard so many things about Eddie. Ed Herrmann told me he thought Eddie cost the Sox the 1967 pennant, Gary Peters said he never had any problems with him and liked playing for him. He seemed to be a complex guy...what was he like to play for?

WW: I can understand where Ed was coming from with his comment. The Sox traded for guys like Rocky Colavito, Jim King and Kenny Boyer and when that happened, guys like Ed Stroud and me were sent to the bench. It's like the Sox wanted to get more power but the guys that sat down, me and Stroud were hitting the ball pretty good. We were the ignition to the offense, they took the bat out of our hands and it seemed like we just didn't play as quite as well afterwards.

(Author's Note: Stroud was hitting .296 in limited play when he was traded in June for King.)

That being said however, Stanky was a genius in that he got the absolute best out of his players and he was always a step or two, or an inning or two, ahead of the other managers. He taught me the game like no other manager ever did.

ML: That season was so unreal for Sox fans. Despite not a lot of hitting the team was right there until the final week when it all came apart in Kansas City and then when you hosted the Senators. That double header loss to the Athletics just seemed to pull the rug out from the team. Do you remember that night and what happened?

(Author's Note: The Sox suffered a disastrous double header loss by the scores of 5-2 and 4-0. In the two games the Sox made three errors and only collected a total of seven hits. Gary Peters took the loss in game #1 despite striking out 10 in 5.2 innings. He allowed only one earned run. Joe Horlen allowed three runs in six innings of work in game #2. He also got tagged with a loss.)

WW: I'm not a guy who makes excuses and maybe I shouldn't be saying this but it's an interview so I will. I remember that night at batting practice in Kansas City; guys looked to me to be overconfident. They'd take swings and then run to first base while still holding the bat...

things like that. We weren't hungry. You have to have that desire to win every game, we didn't and they stuck it right up our behinds.

ML: Walt how hard is it to play under that kind of pressure in the first place? There was a lot at stake that final week, how did you keep your sanity?

WW: Gary Peters helped me keep my sanity down the stretch. I remember a game against Detroit, we were winning by a run and they had a couple guys on with two out. Someone hit a fly ball to me and I misjudged it, they scored a couple runs to take the lead. I'm sitting there in the dugout with my head in my hands when Peters slapped me on the back and told me not to worry about it. He said, and I'll always be grateful to him for this, that he knew I was the kind of player who always gave 100 per cent, I always tried and that if he was to lose the game, that's the way it was. To make a long story short I hit a home run to wind up winning the game. I still remember Gary coming up to me; he was a good teammate and a great, great pitcher.

ML: Do you still think about how close you came to a World Series? Does it bother you?

WW: No, not really. I don't think about it much. I always felt like because they moved me to the bench when they got those other guys that it was out of my hands. When I played I gave it everything I could but I wasn't playing down the stretch so what could I do?

(Author's Note: In that double header loss to the A's, Williams only came up to bat one time as a pinch hitter. In the three game series with Washington he only batted twice in one game.)

ML: After that 1967 season the Sox went into the worst three year stretch in franchise history. They lost 295 games in that period, there was talk of them moving to Milwaukee, and fans didn't show up or care. It was a chaotic time, yet for you, it seemed that you were evolving as a player. You hit .304 in 1969 for example and started to establish yourself as a legitimate big leaguer.

WW: I never understood the finer points of the game, I just played. Growing up I always thought I was just as good a player as anybody else and when someone said, 'he's too short,' or 'he can't hit,' I took that as a challenge. I always felt I could hit, I had one of the quicker bats around and you can ask the tough right handed pitchers I faced, like Nolan Ryan and he'll tell you the same thing. When I hit .300 I honestly was like, 'I should be hitting .400.

ML: I guess it was right after you hit .300 you got into a contract dispute with then Sox G.M. Ed Short. Tell me about that.

WW: I was the type of player when the club sent me a contract I signed it. I never wanted any trouble. After I hit .300 I was talking with Jerome Holtzman of the Sun-Times and he asked me what I was making. When I told him, he didn't believe it; he thought I was kidding him. When he realized I wasn't he said I should be getting paid what other guys who hit .300 were getting and we talked about what I should do when the Sox sent me my contract.

I was making 12 thousand and the Sox offered me 14 thousand. I didn't sign the contract. Everyone else signed and by now the newspapers with guys like Holtzman and Dave Nightingale were writing, 'why can't the Sox sign their only .300 hitter?'

Ed Short called me in to his office and just cursed me out. He called me things that you couldn't do today and to be honest when I left that meeting I was crying but I told him I wanted a 100 per cent raise on what I made. Short finally said that I had a choice. I could take the Sox offer of 14 thousand or I could have my 100 per cent raise but he promised I wouldn't play a lot, maybe once a week against a tough right handed pitcher and that next season he'd cut me the maximum amount, which at that time was 20 per cent.

I told him I wanted the 100 per cent raise. He said fine, I signed the contract and I didn't play a lot, I wasn't in the lineup much and it was an unpleasant year.

(Author's Note: In 1970 Walt hit .251 with 315 at bats. In 1969 he hit .304 with 471 at bats. Short never got the chance to cut Williams' pay in 1971 because he, along with most of the front office was fired in September 1970. In 1971 playing under manager Chuck Tanner, Walt hit .294)

ML: Starting in 1971 Chuck Tanner and Roland Hemond took over and the fortunes of the team changed dramatically. The Sox had one of the greatest turnarounds in baseball history going from 56 wins to 79. Tell me about Chuck and Roland and what they meant to the club.

WW: Those were two guys who had the same idea about how a baseball team should be run. You liked both of them from jump street, right from the beginning. They were gentlemen, they treated you like a man, gave you respect and talked *with* you not *to* you. I never got the sense when I talked to them that it was a situation of a boss talking to a worker. Chuck was a real motivator.

ML: Then in 1972 at the winter meetings Roland Hemond got Dick Allen. Later he and Chuck would say that Dick saved the franchise. Tell me about Dick as a player and as a teammate.

WW: Dick and I spent a lot of time together. I think he liked the fact that I always played hard and always tried to have a smile on my face. He was a great player, he had a lot of talent and I admired him. He could be a little moody at times and I know some folks didn't like him but he knew baseball.

Dick sort of took me under his wing and we'd talk a lot of baseball. He had a low voice and when he'd tell you something it was short and to the point. When he spoke you listened to him.

(Author's Note: You've seen these numbers before regarding Dick's season but they are worth repeating. Allen would finish the season almost winning the Triple Crown. He led the league with 37 home runs, 113 RBI's, a .603 slugging percentage and 99 walks. He led the Sox with a .308 batting average, drove in 19 game winning runs, stole 19 bases, scored 90 runs and was only .0005 points shy of leading all A.L. first basemen in fielding. He was the leading vote getter for the All-Star team and was awarded the league's M.V.P. award. Chuck Tanner said that

Allen's season was the single greatest individual year he ever saw in all his years in the major leagues.)

ML: Any stories about Dick?

WW: (laughing) One I remember involved Milt Wilcox. He was pitching against us and he threw one high and tight to Dick and he hit him. Dick picked up the baseball and sort of walked it out to Milt as he was heading down the line and quietly said to him, "I know you have to pitch inside but you better not hit me again.

ML: 1972 was such a wonderful year for Sox fans, you guys fought the A's tooth and nail and if Bill Melton doesn't get hurt perhaps the Athletics dynasty never happens.

WW: "It seemed like that season everybody picked up everybody else when it was needed. We loved each other on that club... there weren't any disputes on the field between us that I can remember. A break here or there and maybe we get to the playoffs, it was an exciting season."

ML: Did it hurt when you were traded?

(Author's Note: Williams was dealt to Cleveland for shortstop Eddie Leon on October 19, 1972.)

WW: Not really. I understood it was part of the business and that the reason the Sox traded me was because they needed something.

ML: Your one significant moment with Cleveland involving the White Sox took place in the 9th inning of a game in Cleveland on...

WW: I know where you're going with this!

ML: August 21, 1973. Stan Bahnsen took a no-hitter into the last of the 9th and with two out you hit a ground single to break it up. Take me through the at-bat.

WW: To this day I never understood why the Sox were playing up on the infield. I played with Stan, he was a former teammate. I wasn't going to lay down a bunt to break up a no-hitter! I had no intention of bunting in a situation like that and I was a great bunter. I could lay down a bunt without sliding my hands up the bat. I guess the Sox were going off the pregame scouting report but I was taught early in my career that you don't do something like that under those circumstances. When I got on base I was actually mad at myself because I had hit the ball well off Stan earlier in the game a couple of times and got nothing for it. The way I was thinking I should have been 4 for 4 and Stan should have never got into this situation in the first place.

(Author's Note: Williams stroked a ground single to the left of Bill Melton, who couldn't get a good break on the ball because he was playing in so tight. Bahnsen retired the next hitter to settle for a one-hit, complete game, 4-0 win.)

ML: I understand from talking to Stan in his interview that the Cleveland fans weren't very happy with you for spoiling history.

WW: No they weren't. When I got back to my car after the game they had trashed it... they left notes on it calling me names, calling my family names. I still have the notes. I keep them in my closet and look at them occasionally.

ML: You've used that attitude of always giving your best throughout your life even after baseball it seems in your work and in your hobbies.

WW: I have. I've always said it doesn't cost you anything to give 100 per cent. I'm the director of the recreation center here in Brownwood and I can basically teach kids how to play anything. Here it's usually basketball but I have some baseball players that I work with too. I tutor them in the game. And I love golf. I shot my age a few weeks ago and won a tournament recently when I shot seven straight birdies down the stretch. You can do anything if you give it your best.

ML: Walt you closed out your career with the Yankees in 1975, that's 10 seasons in the big leagues, not bad for a guy deemed "too small." Can you sum up your time with the White Sox for me?

WW: Chicago has always been my love, my heart. I still have friends that I met when I played there. Some of my fans have kept in touch over the years from Chicago. It has always been my favorite city. The people were always good to me. I was living in a fantasy-land, playing a game for money in a nice city for people like Eddie Stanky and Chuck Tanner. It was truly a blessing.



