

Johnny Kucks (JK)

9/8/1993 (by telephone)
interviewer Tom Harris, NJ

You were born July 27th 1932 in Hoboken, New Jersey. Tell me about your family life and where you grew up.

JK- OK, you're right there, Thomas, my boy. I was born July 27th 1932 in Hoboken, New Jersey and moved up to Jersey City when I was about six years old. My lovely wife Barbara and I have been married since 1955. We'll be celebrating our 38th anniversary October 6th of this year. I also have two wonderful daughters, Rebecca and Laura Jean.

OK, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

JK- In my family I had seven, which I was the youngest. I had four sisters and two other brothers. I would make the seventh one.

OK, you grew up to Jersey City. What high school did you go to?

JK- Yeah, I grew up in Jersey City and lived in Jersey City about eighteen years and went to a high school called Dickerson High School in Jersey.

OK, where did you start playing ball and how did you get started?

JK- OK, when I was in Jersey City I was playing baseball with a milk man by the name of Howard Webbe (?) who formed the team and I played before even attending high school, was like a semi-pro team. We would go around playing the different area ball clubs. And then most of my baseball was then played when I went into high school at Dickerson High School and played the four years on the baseball team.

I see, were you a pitcher always?

JK- I was an outfielder and a pitcher, mainly when I didn't pitch, I did play in the outfield. The way I was hitting in the last years, I should have stuck to pitching.

Did you enjoy pitching back then, early on? Did you feel like you wanted to pitch?

JK- No, I always wanted to pitch. When I went to high school I switched from being an outfielder into pitching. I enjoyed pitching and Howard Webbe (?) gave me some good instructions and it worked out fine.

OK, I understand that you threw a sinker ball. Can you tell where you learned to throw the sinker ball?

JK- I'd be glad to do that in terms of the main pitch that I did was a sinker and basically I didn't really try to throw it any special way. It was just like when a guy throws a fastball, automatically started to sink and it always sank. It was just a natural pitch to throw, not doing anything to the ball. Some guys today have to turn the ball over a little bit to make it sink. Mine was just basically natural.

You had a natural sinker almost, then?

JK- Yes.

OK, after high school, what happened to you after high school?

JK- After high school, I graduated from high school. I signed with the New York Yankees.

Who signed you?

JK- A guy by the name of, uh, you got me on that one. I can't think of his name right now. I will go through in the conversation that we're having to remember his name. He signed me out of high school in 1952 and I went down to the Yankee farm club in Norfolk. It was a Class B team/league at that particular time and stayed there that one year and had a record of about 18-9 and had a manager by the name of Mayo Smith, who later on in life became a manager for the Detroit Tigers.

Who were some of the other players on your team, do you recall?

JK- Well, there were some players on the team but I don't think you're going to know the names. Charlie Abrunn (?) was a pitcher. Buddy Carter was the third baseman. Charlie Hutton was the shortstop. These are guys that played on and off our club.

I see, that was in '52, you said, right?

JK- That was in '52.

Then in '53, you went up the scale, so to speak?

JK- No, then in 1953...in '52 I went to spring training after the '52 season, I went to a rookie school down in Lake Wales, Florida where they had the rookie camp where they brought some of the outstanding prospects down there to work out. When I was down there my dad sent me a telex saying that I was drafted into the United States Army. I went into the Army in 1953. In 1954 I spent one year down at Fort Dix, New Jersey and the other year in Kaiserslauten, Germany. So after the 1953 and '54 service contingent, I then went into professional baseball again and was invited down to another rookie school in 1955. And the Yankees decided to keep me over basically to pitch with the big club. And I made the club in '55.

So you started in '55 with the Yankees, then?

JK- I started in '55 with the Yankees after going to spring training.

You came north with the club?

JK- I came north with the club and in those days one of the reasons that helped me make the club was the fact that in those days you could carry twenty five men on the roster. They carried two guys that came out of the service. They would call that the national defensive list. So they two guys they carried was Billy Martin and myself and we didn't count on the roster of twenty five so it really didn't hurt their roster and we made the club in '55.

Do you recall your first game?

JK- The first game was against the Boston Red Sox and we won that game five to two. I pitched the game in Yankee Stadium.

Did you start?

JK- I started the game and went about six innings.

Now, your rookie year you went eight and seven.

JK- My rookie year in 1955, I went 8-7, right. But it was a big year other than going 8-7 because many things happened to me in my rookie year. Not only signing my first major league contract, becoming a major league pitcher, having a record of 8-7. I also was initiated into the World Series in '55 by Duke Snider hitting a home run off me and also at the end of the season I was married to my lovely wife.

That's great. Tell me a bit about the '55 Series, your first entry into the '55 Series.

JK- The first entry into the '55 Series was in a relief basis and the first time I got to relieve they had a couple of men on and Snider hit a three-run homer off me.

Correct if I'm wrong. That was game three in Brooklyn?

JK- My memory is good, but not that great. I don't remember what game it was.

OK- So Snider hit a home run off of you and you lost that game.

JK- Yes.

OK, it's well known that the Yankees went on to lose the Series to the Dodgers.

JK- Oh, we lost it 4-3. Podres won three games against us.

Do you recall a great disappointment after the team lost the Series?

JK- No, not really. I guess because you got to look at me and the fact that I was a rookie and here I am playing with a club that down the road just won five championships in a row before that.

How about the other players, they were not particularly upset? I know the Dodgers were...

JK- Sure, you're always upset when you win a championship, but I don't think you're going to jump out the window for the fact that it did go seven games I believe, and it doesn't do any good, and they had great teams and they deserved to win.

Right. OK. So in '56 it is your year, so to speak. You go 18-9. Tell me about '56 and what, if anything, you think personally, that allowed you have the success that you did.

JK- Well I think probably what happened is I got more opportunities to start. And, just to backtrack a little bit, after the '55 season and the World Series, the Yankees were invited to go on a goodwill trip to Japan by the United States government and Pepsi-Cola company. While I went

on this trip I worked on a slider, a different pitch when I was over there in Japan. I think basically coming back in '56 that slider helped me out a little bit because it was a new pitch and I perfected it a little bit because I didn't have a great curveball. The slider was a real good breaking pitch for me and then what happened was I remember there was a game in the beginning, I don't know whether it was April or May, when Tommy Byrne got sick and got some type of flu and was put into the hospital and I had to take his spot to pitch and I won a game and I stayed in the starting rotation most of the year.

OK, and you continued your success. So, you think your development of the slider helped you in '56.

JK- Yeah, I think so. I think the development of the slider and getting the opportunity to pitch more, keeping the ball down, and you know, many, many things, lead you to have a good year. Being a little lucky.

You had three shutouts that year.

JK- Well, I guess, if you say that. I don't know how many shutouts I had.

You did have three shutouts.

JK- Right.

You pitched 224 innings and you tossed 12 complete games, I see. So, apparently, you were doing well. The '56 Series?

JK- The '56 Series was the following way. At the end of the year in 1956 I wasn't really pitching that well. So, what he did was he took me out of the starting rotation. Then we got into the Series and I relieved in that Series, got hit a few times, in that Series, in the beginning. And, then when we got to the fifth game with Larsen pitching, and then the sixth game Turley was pitching in Brooklyn when we back to Brooklyn after Larsen pitched the perfect game, then the seventh game came along and I didn't really find out I was going to pitch that game until probably an hour before game time at Ebbets Field.

Tell me how you were told you were pitching the game? Did you have any inkling you might be starting the game?

JK- Well, I knew one thing that he didn't know who he was going to start. I knew I had a lot of rest. I knew we had a tired pitching staff. I thought there would be a possibility but there was a long possibility since he wasn't using me near the end of the year very much.

Right.

JK- That he would go to me on that seventh game, but of course, you find out how you pitch by Frankie Crosetti putting a ball in your shoe in your locker room if you're the starting pitcher. He'd put a new white ball in your shoe.

That's how he did it throughout the season?

JK- All through the season. All through five years of playing with him. Same way all the time.

When you saw the ball in your shoe, were you nervous, were you happy, how did you feel?

JK- You got a little bit nervous.

But, you were ready to go?

JK- Well yeah. I had a lot of rest and I felt that I was happy that he picked me as the starting pitcher. But of course, you're a little nervous. You don't think you're happy. You just get the ball and go out there and give it the best shot you've got and what happened during the course of the game is I got a lot of runs which helps out any pitcher.

That's right. As I understand it, Bill Skowron hit a home run. Elston hit one and Yogi hit two.

JK- Yeah, Yogi hit two two-run homers. I think Ellie hit one and Skowron hit one.

And Skowron hit a grand slam in the seventh.

JK- Right. The score turned out to be 9-0.

And you gave up only three hits.

JK- Well, I gave up three hits and there was only one strikeout in the game. That strikeout was the last out of the game and it was Jackie Robinson and Jackie Robinson never picked up another major league bat. That was the last time he ever faced major league pitching.

Did you walk anybody in the game?

JK- That's a good question. I think I did.

Did you feel like you had great stuff as you were going on?

JK- Well I had good stuff. The ball was moving very well. The ball was sinking. Yogi caught an outstanding game. It's a difficult park to pitch in, Ebbets Field, very small park compared to Yankee Stadium. But, when you have a lot of runs it takes a lot of the pressure off you.

Right. They can't do anything. They can't take an extra base if they get on, etc.

JK- Sure.

Let me ask you about Don Larsen's perfect game. Where were you, in the dugout?

JK- No, I was in the bullpen. We knew basically that he had a no-hitter going. I don't think we all knew he had a perfect game going until somebody mentioned that about the sixth inning in the bullpen, that he had a perfect game going. Because these things, you go along, and looking at it, it's not the first time you've seen a guy throw a no-hitter or something for a number of innings before somebody breaks it up.

Right.

JK- When you're in the bullpen, you're basically away from the action. You're looking. You're observing. It's a little different than sitting in the dugout when you know, after every inning you

came in and you had a little bit of the guys coming in from the field. But, in those days a lot of guys never said too much about anything when a guy's pitching a no-hitter. Or a perfect game.

They think it's a jinx..

JK- Excuse me?

They think it's like a jinx.

JK- Yeah, that's the way it was in those days. Nowadays the announcers announce it. The players announce it. The guys say you're going on a no-hitter. They really don't care.

Yeah.

JK- A change of the times, that's all.

I suppose so. So that was the biggest thrill for you, pitching a complete game shutout, a three-hitter against the Brooklyn Dodgers. Was there any special feeling like a feeling of vindication at having lost the previous year? Was there any special feeling of accomplishment that after losing to the Dodgers to come back and beat them in '56?

JK- No, I don't think that there was any. You got to understand that the Yankee organization and the Yankee ball club basically felt they were going to win. It wasn't a cockiness. It wasn't anything that you could pinpoint. They just had this knowing feeling that they can win a lot of baseball games. And they went into that series thinking basically that they were going to win it. Just like in 1955. So, it took an outstanding three-game effort by Podres to make us lose. Then, as we went along in 1956 World Series, we felt that we can win it. You look at the pitching and you go to Larsen's game and he pitched a perfect game and he won two nothing. You go to the next game and Turley loses one nothing. That's only one run they got. You look at my game and I shut them out. They got one run in three games.

That's true.

JK- So, they didn't really, you know, and they were a good hitting club.

Very good.

JK- Very good. A lot of power.

That's true. OK, so '56 you win the World Championship. I'm sure you felt like very special then. In '57 you come back in spring training.

JK- Yeah, '57, we go back to spring training and I start the year off as a starting pitcher. Of course, with the Yankee organization, as far as being a starter, if you're doing the job you stay. If you don't, you go in the bullpen. So, in 1957, I wasn't doing too good in the beginning and they put me in the bullpen. And, a majority of the time I was like a spot starter and reliever. I think I wound up, maybe having a record of about eight and eight.

It was 8-10, as it says here.

JK- Eight and ten? Yeah?

In '57, you played the Milwaukee Braves and Lew Burdette wins three games.

JK- The same thing that some pitcher has an outstanding pitching career against us. It did an outstanding job.

Right. You now appear in game two, you got into the first inning and they scored a lot of runs in game two in Milwaukee off Turley. Do you recall anything in that game?

JK- No, the only thing I remember, I think one of the years, I don't know it was '57 or '58 I had the Asian Flu and that made me stop from being available for the club.

OK, in '57, seventh game, you lose 6-2, Lew Burdette is the winning pitcher, like you said. Disappointing?

JK- Well, once again, as I said, I think it's disappointing any time you lose a World's Championship, it's disappointing. But, in those days you only had the American League and the National League. Eight teams in one league and eight teams in the other. You won the American League Championship in 1955. You won in 1956. Now, we're up to 1957 and won it again, just to get into the World Series. And, there's a little disappointment when you lose, but once again, I think that went to the seventh game also.

It did.

JK- Yeah.

What you saying is that you didn't take the losses too hard, then?

JK- Well, I did. You took losses. You took them not that hard. You did not like to lose, but you're not going to jump off a bridge.

Right, I understand.

JK- You know, you're a professional and that was a professional organization, a professional team, so you accepted the fact that the other guy did a better job, OK?

All right. So, in '58, the record shows you were 8-8 but you started only fifteen games that year so you were used mostly in relief.

JK- Mostly in relief.

Although I see you picked up four saves that year.

JK- Yeah.

Tell me about '58 if you can.

JK- Well, '58 basically, the year went on again and as far as myself goes with the 8-8 record, I was a reliever. I was a spot starter, occasionally. It went along the same way as I went along in 1957. In '58, and once again I was fortunate enough to pitch on a team that won a pennant again

which would be four years in a row and getting against Milwaukee again. Well, we were down three games to one and come back and won it four to three.

You were able to pay the favor back to the Braves?

JK- Sure thing.

You were able to pay the favor back to the Braves?

JK- Yeah, because that was a tough way to pay them back because...

You were down three games to one.

JK- Three games to one, you don't come back and win too many times.

No.

JK- I think the percentages are against you to think you're going to win. But, we came back and we were lucky and the guys did an outstanding job and won it four games to three.

I see you appeared in game two and you appeared also in game four although the Yankees got shutout by Warren Spahn in game four in Yankee Stadium. Whitey started the game and apparently there was big crowd of 71,000 there from what I see.

JK- How many?

71,563.

JK- In Milwaukee?

No, Yankee Stadium versus Spahn.

JK- Oh, I'm sorry, Yankee Stadium, I apologize. I'm keep thinking of Milwaukee. We played in Milwaukee.

OK, so now in '58, World Champs again. In '59 you started out the season with the Yanks. Shortly into the season...

JK- The trade.

They traded you. From what I see here you were traded for Hector Lopez and Ralph Terry. Jerry Lumpe and Tom Sturdivant went to the Athletics. Tell me how you heard about the trade and what you thought at the time?

JK- Well, we were going along, the Yankees, and we were in third place and we all knew that maybe something was going to be happening, a shakeup. The club and what happened is they called me up at home and said to get over to the Stadium early than normally. I get over to the Stadium and the old man, Casey was in the office and he called me in and said that you have been traded to Kansas City with Lumpe and Sturdivant for Hector Lopez and Ralph Terry. What happened, my lovely wife was expecting our first child so that was a little disappointing being

traded all the way out to Kansas City at that particular time. So that's really what happened. We'd made a lot of trades with Kansas City at that time.

Were you disappointed when you were traded? For several reasons, not the least of which your wife was pregnant?

JK- Yes, one of the biggest reasons was knowing the fact being traded I have to go to Kansas City and Barbara has to stay home. But disappointing because of the fact that this was an organization that you signed with out of high school and they nurtured you through the minor leagues. They brought you up and you went through the whole system with them and then you're traded. Anything for a twenty-something year old guy to be traded is a little disappointing. Yeah, sure. You're going from a first place club to a last place club.

Did you talk to Tom Sturdivant and Jerry Lumpe? Did you see those guys over in Kansas City? Did you talk about the trade after you got there or do you just get down to business and start playing?

JK- I don't think we talked too much about the trade. We just got down there and we saw a lot of guys that we played with on the Yankees before so we felt like we were home. We felt like we were on a farm club or something.

OK, so you go to Kansas City. You go 8-8, you go 8-11, I'm sorry. Tell me what you remember about Kansas City.

JK- Well, Kansas City was, Harry Craft was the manager. It's a funny thing. I think it was in that year of '59 we had a good winning streak going. We did all right for a while and then we finally wound up in last place. As far as my year goes, just basically a spot starter and reliever again, finishing the year 8-8 and that's about it. I can't remember any outstanding achievements at all.

OK, so you finish '59 with Kansas City. In spring training you go with them to Kansas City's spring training. But, what was it that spring training that was much different than with the Yankees? What did you feel about going into that season?

JK- Well, number one, I'm fighting for a job for them when I was fighting with New York and remembering spring training in 1960, we're talking about 1960 now?

1960.

JK- I had an pretty outstanding spring and what happened was instead of starting me, which I thought I was going to be a starter, they stuck me in the bullpen to be a long reliever. That didn't seem to work out too good for me. I had a real lousy year that year. I don't know what I finished up.

Four and ten.

JK- Four and ten.

I see the manager in '60 for Kansas City was Bob Elliott.

JK- Bob Elliott was the manager at that time in 1960.

And apparently, the A's didn't do too well.

JK- Well they didn't do too well too much of the time!

Right, so not a particularly enjoyable season?

JK- Lousy season. Lousy.

So how does it feel like going out to Kansas City, and your wife is here? Did you have an apartment out in Kansas City? How did it work?

JK- What happened was they had a hotel out there that was outside the vicinity of the park out there. I forget the name of the hotel. We had an apartment out there and Barbara, after the baby was born, came out for awhile to spend some time with me.

What was the name of the stadium that the Kansas City A's played in?

JK- Municipal Stadium.

What do you make about all of that? Good place?

JK- Recall the following: very, very hot in the summertime but also a very breezy ballpark where the wind liked to blow out a lot. And balls used to carry very good. Such parks balls carried, this is one of the parks that the balls carried very well in, Municipal Stadium.

OK, how did it feel to pitch against the Yankees, or did you pitch against the Yankees?

JK- Yeah, I pitched against them and the first time I pitched against them I beat them 3-1 and that was a nice feeling to beat your old club.

Was it at Yankee Stadium?

JK- No, it was in Municipal Stadium in Kansas City.

Was it in '59 or '60?

JK- That was in 1960.

'60, OK. So, 1960. The A's had a bad year and as you pointed out you didn't have a particularly good year either. What were your thoughts at the end of '60 and what happened in 1961?

JK- Well, the idea about 1960 is that I was very happy to go home. What happened in 1961 I went to spring training. They made some changes in Kansas City. Frank Lane became the general manager and Joe Gordon became the field manager and they made some changes and I was one of the changes where I was sent down to Rochester in the International League when spring training broke. And, I played for a guy by the name of Clyde King down there.

Who later got involved with the Yankees, as I recall.

JK- Yes, yes.

He even managed for a period of time.

JK- Yes, he did. I stayed with the Rochester Red Wings in the International League in 1961. In 1962 I was sent to Atlanta, Georgia with the Atlanta Crackers and I played with the Atlanta Crackers in 1962 and 1963. And then in 1964, I went to spring training with the Atlanta Crackers and hurt my arm and after I hurt my arm, the St. Louis Cardinals owned the Atlanta Crackers and they made me a roving pitching instructor for all of 1964 after I hurt my arm. After I finished 1964, I retired and became a stockbroker in 1965.

Compare the minor leagues that you just named and also your first minor league team. Compare what the minor leagues life is like to the major league life.

JK- Well, it's going to be a difference because of the fact number one in those days, you'd laugh at the meal money in the major leagues. You got about eight dollars a day and in the minor leagues you got about four dollars a day. The ballparks are much smaller. You travel a lot by bus as much as they possibly can. You do fly in planes, or commercial planes. The minor leagues was the minor leagues. They're supposed to not be as great as the big leagues, to give you something to reach for.

Did you play with anybody at either Rochester or Atlanta that was either on the way up...?

JK- Sure, I would say more so with Atlanta with the two years I played because it was a Cardinal farm club. So, I played with guys like Mike Shannon and Tim McCarver and Phil Gagliano. None of the pitchers really made it. Sadowski, Bob Sadowski was traded. He went to Milwaukee from Atlanta. Joe Schultz was the manager who eventually became I think, the manager of the St. Louis Cardinals for about a year or so.

This is at Atlanta?

JK- This is all at Atlanta.

What about Rochester? Who was the manager?

JK- Rochester, Clyde King was the manager.

Oh, you said that, right.

JK- Yeah, Clyde was the manager and as far as any guys playing, I played with Luke Easter, a big lefthanded fellow and anybody else, Valentine, who turned out to be a centerfielder for the Baltimore Orioles.

Right.

JK- And, who else can I think of that went up? Oh, Boog Powell played down there, too. Boog played at first base for Rochester.

OK, you said you were a roving pitching instructor for the Cardinals in '64. Where did you do this? Did you do this in the minor leagues?

JK- What I did was I flew out to Oklahoma City and I scouted the International League, the American Association. The American Association and the International League both had a

Triple-A rating. So, they sent me out there and I stayed in Oklahoma City and scouted some of the people coming in.

OK, what made you chose to not do anything such as that any longer and to go into stockbroker's business?

JK- Well, see, when I played with Kansas City I took a correspondence course with the New York Institute of Finance to get my broker's license. So once I had the broker's license, I knew basically what I was going to do if I ever retired from baseball and I needed something to fall back on and that license gave me that opportunity. As far as trying to do anything more in baseball, I felt that I didn't want to do that. I felt that, you know, I'd seen twenty guys jumping from club to club as a coach, as a scout, going to winter meetings, looking for jobs, and I wanted a little more stable position.

I see, OK.

JK- How's that sound, good?

So, you were completely uninvolved with baseball. You didn't coach in the local area or anything like that?

JK- Well, we formed a league around the metropolitan area called the Atlanta Collegiate Baseball League. What did that mean? I meant that we formed a league to give college ballplayers maybe an extra forty games to play in the summertime. We had about four or five teams played. It was back by the Mets and the Yankees and the commissioner's office. In fact, I think it still exists. It's been going on for a long time and I managed one of the clubs, Jersey City club and I did that for about, I think I did that for about four years and then I decided I didn't want to do it any more. I did that on my own time. They played a lot of night games in Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City, which does not exist anymore.

Yes, I know. Were you good friends with anybody on either the Yankees or Kansas City?

JK- Well, my roommate was Skowron and Bob Grim, so I would say that Skowron was a very good friend. Bob Grim, Sturdivant, Jerry Lumpe, they're all basically good guys, good friends.

Those were your closest friends on the team?

JK- Yeah, I would say, yes. Usually you found out when you played that, you know, the younger guys stick together, the veterans stick together, different things like that.

OK, John, I wanted to ask you. There was a famous incident at the Copacabana. I believe it was 1957. Tell me what you know about the Copacabana incident.

JK- Well, what I know about it is the following: it started to be Billy Martin's birthday party and Barbara and I were invited to go and basically we went with the premise that we thought there was a lot of people that was going to attend this birthday party. But, it turned out to be Whitey and his wife and Yogi and his wife and Mantle, Martin, and Hank Bauer was there. We started off at Danny's Hideaway for a little dinner. We went to the Waldorf to see some entertainment and from the Waldorf we went over to the Copacabana. We walked in. There were some tables which were occupied by a bowling party. Sammy Davis, Jr. was singing on the floor. The bowling party

started to get a little bit loud and recognizing some of the athletes walk in to the door and made a little bit of a stir and a little bit of commotion.

Did the commotion...?

JK- A commotion, verbally.

Toward you guys?

JK- Yeah, basically because of the fact of the popularity of Mantle and Martin. They didn't know who I was. They knew who they were. So, they saw a recognizable athlete coming in and then after a while what happened was a couple of their guys went outside and a couple of our guys went outside, not outside, but they have an ante-cove like. I can't explain that to you. An ante-cove is an area leading to go outside but it's still inside and you would only go by going through two metal doors. There was a big commotion out there. When I got out there to look at what the commotion was I saw this guy laying down. But, everybody said Billy hit him, but Billy wasn't even near the guy. What we were told later on is that one of the bouncers hit the guy and knocked him down on his back.

Well, it caused a big commotion in the press the following day.

JK- Of course, sure.

But, as far as you know, the bouncer hit him, right.

JK- No, let me tell you the story. What I know is that the bouncer hit him. Nobody else hit him. Billy didn't hit him. Hank didn't hit him. Nobody hit him. Nobody threw a punch. There was a lot of people around back there and that's what we were told. Don't worry about a thing. The bouncer hit him. Of course, the guy was causing a disturbance at the Copacabana. So, it was a Copacabana employee who hit him. When the guy woke up and he looked up I guess he saw Bauer or somebody standing over him.

Were you questioned by George Weiss or anybody else after the incident?

JK- We were called into the stadium. We had a meeting with George Weiss, yes.

And I assumed you told him what you just told me.

JK- We only told the truth and that's exactly what happened. And, that's what I'm telling you.

Right, OK sure. Was your impression was that George Weiss didn't believe you?

JK- No, that wasn't my impression that he didn't believe us. No. No. He believed us.

It was widely mentioned that Billy Martin was traded shortly after the Copa incident because he felt that Billy did precipitate the fight, or was involved in a fight somehow.

JK- Well, I think probably the reason was the fact that I don't think Billy and George Weiss got along during the course of his tenure with the New York Yankees. And as far as any reason why he traded him, I guess that threw him over the edge and made him do it.

I see. OK. Now, I also want to ask you, I know, and I don't know if it was George Weiss or not, but I know there was some private detectives assigned to watch Mickey Mantle, Billy Martin, and Whitey Ford, and I believe it was Tony Kubek and Bobby Richardson. I wonder if you can tell me what you recall about that.

JK- Well, that was a big joke because they did have detectives following us in Detroit and for whatever reasons that George Weiss wanted to do, it turned out to be a joke because they had one on us and Bobby Shantz and Kubek and Richardson and I went to the YMCA to play ping pong, so they followed us there. And, Whitey and Mickey were in the lobby one day when we were down and a detective was standing there and Whitey and Mickey said "Watch what we do." And in a Detroit hotel, you had two entrances. What they did was they got in a cab at the one entrance and as they pulled away a detective followed them in another cab. They went around a corner and pulled up the other entrance and walked back into the lobby, with the other guy trailing right behind! So, it was a big joke and that only lasted for a few days when they found out what a joke they were making of it.

OK, I want to ask you about a couple of people you were teammates of and you were involved with on the Yankees, OK? You played for Casey Stengel. I wonder if you can tell me what you recall about Casey?

JK- Well, Casey was basically like a father figure to me because I was very young guy when I got up there about twenty-two, twenty-three. Casey was around a long time. He was a, everybody thought he was a double-talking guy but one thing is I found out is that when he wanted you to know something, you knew what he was talking about.

He didn't double-talk you then?

JK- No, I don't think so, and any meetings that we had he didn't double-talk. He did an outstanding job. I liked Casey. I guess I liked him because he gave me the opportunity to make the ballclub.

The way Casey ran the club, he double-talked to the press mostly. Is that what you're saying?

JK- He was very good to the press. The press loved him. He always gave them a story.

It's been said that he had a great memory for a lot of things and for strategy and so on. Is your impression that he was a student of the game and knew the game very well?

JK- Sure, I think that he was a good manager but you know, I'm a big believer in that the manager is only as good as the material and his ballplayers. I will tell you one thing. He had some great ballplayers to pull the strings on.

OK, do you think the team would have won even without Casey, I'll say, a different manager? I know you liked Casey.

JK- I wouldn't want to even think about that. I couldn't figure that club without him for that length of time. They did win later on when Ralph Houk took over from Casey.

Do you recall when Casey was fired from the Yankees after the '60 Series? Do you recall hearing about it?

JK- Yeah, I heard about it, but, see what happened was in 1960 when he was let go and the Mets became, I was down, was he let go in '60?

Yeah, after the '60 Series after Mazerowski homer.

JK- OK, after the '60 Series. And then in '61 when I was at Rochester, he was let go in '60 and in '61 the Mets formed their team and I went to spring training with the Mets in 1962. And I think one of the reasons was because of him. I was let go at the end of spring training and didn't make that club.

So, you saw Casey in '62.

JK- Yeah, he became the manager of the Mets.

OK, was he the same as he always was?

JK- Yeah sure. That type of guy. He never changed. He did that job for Weiss and you know, Weiss was the general manager of the Mets.

Did Casey have any pet peeves about his pitchers? Did he get especially upset, if say, you gave up a hit on an 0-2 pitch? Did you have anything that he wanted you to pay specific attention to?

JK- No, not really. I'll tell you what. I can't never really think of him or remember Casey as being the type of guy that would chew you out or anything to that effect. No manager likes a guy to get a base hit on an 0-2 count but he never really chastised us or ripped into us. Jim Turner handled all the pitching.

That's what I was going to ask you. Jim Turner was the pitching coach for your time at the Yankees.

JK- Yeah sure.

Tell me about Jim Turner and it's been said that Casey relied heavily on Jim Turner.

JK- Oh Jim was an outstanding pitching coach and an outstanding person. You know, every year that I was there. Basically, every thing you do at that club as a pitcher, you went through him. He was the guy like your manager, you know you never went to Stengel. Any information that came from Stengel would come through Jim and Jim would be the one with telling who was going to start and who was going to be in the bullpen, etc. So Casey relied on him a great deal.

Let me ask you about a couple of your teammates.

JK- How long are we going now? How long are we going with the interview here?

Just a little bit more.

JK- OK.

OK, Elston Howard was a rookie when you were. Can you tell what you recall about Elston Howard's rookie year. It was the same as yours was. Was it significant in any way? Did you see him encounter any problems?

JK- Well in those times in 1955 you've got to realize Ellie being black at that time there was still situations around where he couldn't stay with us. He couldn't stay with us in spring training. He had to go in a certain area in St. Petersburg and couldn't stay with us in Kansas City. He had to go to a different area and to a private family, I believe. He couldn't stay in the hotel. So, he had it difficult, I know. He didn't have it as difficult as Robinson did but Ellie had it a little difficult and Ellie and I came up together in '55.

Right.

JK- He was a rookie and I was a rookie.

OK, a couple other of your teammates. What do you recall about them? Don Larsen.

JK- Larsen, a lot of fun. He had an outstanding game in pitching a perfect game in 1956. He was also a very quality pitcher, I thought. Yeah.

Enos Slaughter was a teammate of yours for a period of time. Right?

JK- Enos Slaughter came over from the Cardinals. The elder statesman of the club. Left-handed hitter. Good pinch hitter and a real good hustler. Good outfielder. That's what I know about Enos.

Gil McDougald was with the Yankees several years. He was a teammate of yours. I understand he was a favorite of Casey's. What do you recall about Gil?

JK- Uh, Mac, outstanding infielder. He could play any position. He played second. He played short. He played third. Good hitter and that's about all I can own up to.

How about Billy Martin? What are your memories of Billy?

JK- Very feisty, competitor. Very big fighter, an aggressive ballplayer who liked to give 100% and he always gave 100%. He always thought Billy was an average hitter but I think he could have had a lifetime batting average of about .260, .265, which today would be great. The way the talk about hitters today hitting .230 and .220 as good hitters. He was a good hitter in today's numbers.

OK, how about Yogi?

JK- Well, what are you going to say about Yogi?

You said you liked pitching to Yogi. He said he called a good game.

JK- Well, number one, he'd give you a good target. He kept you going. He made you not give up. He called an outstanding game. He handled you very well. Outstanding hitter. Hall of Fame. Now, who am I to say about Yogi? Yogi is Yogi. He was one of the greatest.

But I wanted to ask you. Did you pitch to Elston Howard?

JK- Yeah, sure.

Elston was a good catcher, too. Did you like pitching to him?

JK- I liked pitching. I liked to pitch to everybody. Charlie Silveri was another catcher.

OK, I've got to ask you about Mickey Mantle. Is there anything you want to share about Mickey Mantle?

JK- Well, to me Mantle is probably, cripe, a great Hall of Fame center fielder who had great speed, who we would have loved to see him play without the bad knees and running the base paths I think there wasn't a better pitcher to see Mantle going from first to third base on a base hit, and the speed that he had. I had the pleasure of playing with him when he had his Triple Crown Year in 1956. It was a dominating season the way it was. You know, MVP Award, Triple Crown, everything. I thought, to me, outstanding ballplayer and people try to say to me who do I think is better, Mantle, Mays, or Snider and I can only go by what I see a guy do everyday and he was by far one of the best.

Whitey Ford was one of the greatest pitchers the Yankees ever had.

JK- Yeah sure.

Tell me what you remember about Whitey, his approach to the game? What do you recall about him?

JK- Well, as far as Ford was, you know, Ellie gave him the name of Chairman of the Board, and probably for me looking back in life, a mediocre career playing with such outstanding ballplayers, I would say, in my estimation, I think that if there was a game to win, Ford would be the starting pitcher. He was just a great competitor. He never gave up. He had outstanding control. He was a good hitter. Good fielder. Did everything.

OK, a couple more guys. Just two more guys. Bob Grim.

JK- You're going to go through fifty ballplayers. I can't go through fifty ballplayers!

No, no, no. Bob Grim. Rookie of the Year.

JK- 1954.

But then he hurt in arm.

JK- In '55, what about it?

Well he hurt his arm in '55, if I not mistaken, right?

JK- Well no. Bob never hurt his arm in '55. It's just a fact that what happened, Bobby was my roommate for four years and he didn't really hurt his arm. He, you know, he started a few games and then they took him out of the starting rotation.

He wasn't able to go back to his rookie year, though.

JK- No. He didn't. See what happens with the Yankees. You go along and as your going good, you'll be pitching. But, if you're not doing the job, even starting, they'll move somebody from the pen and put him into the starting rotation. Sometimes, what happens is guys get hot and you

never get back. You know, ask Lou Gehrig with Wally Pipp. Or ask Wally Pipp about Lou Gehrig. He never got back!

Right.

JK- If you don't mind, I got to take a drink of diet soda.

One more guy, that's Tony Kubek, because he's broadcasting today. Did you see him as being incisive and knowledgeable of the game or was he, at the time, appear to be just a player to you? A player like any other.

JK- Tony, to me, was a great shortstop. They had a great club when he and Richardson was the combination at second and short. Tony was a very aggressive ballplayer. He liked to win, a good hitter. Nice guy. Very knowledgeable about the game, even though you never realized he was going to become such an outstanding broadcaster as he is today.

OK, my last question is, what is your opinion of the game today? How much do you follow it?

JK- I follow it very well. I'm a big fan of baseball. What do I think of the game today? The game has changed a lot from the days that we played. We played with eight teams in the American League and eight teams in the National League. Today they play, twenty eight teams, they have. What does that do to baseball? It waters down the talent a little bit in terms of guys coming up quicker than maybe they should be coming up. And, when you do that you see a lot of guys with basically mediocre careers. Not everybody. But you see guys hitting .220, .230 or something to that effect. I also see the change in salaries, which is great. I think they should get all they can get, as long as they don't complain about it. As far as any other changes go, you know, it's still a game in between the white lines. You still got the sixty feet, six inches from the pitching mound. You have some outstanding talent playing today. I think, great talent. I think the popularity of baseball is that it's just as popular as when we played. The only thing that I feel that you're missing is, what am I trying to say to you, the difference stadiums and the different characters of the stadiums like Fenway Park and Yankee Stadium and Crosley Field and Metropolitan Stadium in Kansas City. Now, when they build a stadium, they are all the same. In fact, I see they made a great change in the one down in Baltimore. Very popular stadium, Camden Yards and it adds a little bit of nostalgia to it. It's always nice to have those ballparks like Fenway Park.

Were you a fan of anybody in particular growing up?

JK- Well, I'll tell you what. As far as being a fan, I lived in Jersey City for about eighteen years. In the time I lived in Jersey City the Giants had their Jersey City Giants as their Triple A farm club. And they played in Jersey City and I was a big Giant fan. I was a big Bobby Thomson fan.

Do you have a preference now?

JK- Yeah, Yankees.

OK. I don't anything else to ask, John. I know you're probably talked out. If there's anything else you wanted to share with me, I'd love to hear it. Otherwise, I think we're done.

JK- No. Listen, I really appreciate you calling me and I think I can't share any more than I have been sharing. I do follow the game. I like the game. I'm a big fan of it. Try to watch it on TV and

read the sports pages constantly every day. It's still going strong and I think it's going to remain here for a long time.

Thanks.

-Transcribed by J. Thomas Hetrick, December, 2005.