Jake Wood (JW)

11/5/1993

interviewer Tom Harris, Rahway, NJ

This is Tom Harris. I'm interviewing Jake Wood at his home in Rahway, New Jersey. Today's date is November 5, 1993. Jake, I understand you were born in Elizabeth. Can you tell me the date?

JW- I was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, June the 22nd 1937.

OK, you grew up there?

JW- I grew up there. I went to school there and spent the majority of my life in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

OK, how many brothers and sisters in your family?

JW- I have four sisters. One passed away and I have three brothers.

OK, where and when did you start playing ball? How, I should say.

JW- Well, ever since I can remember being a youth in Elizabeth, I've always wanted to be a baseball player. I remember growing up and being a Brooklyn Dodger fan during the years when they had Pee Wee Reese and Jackie Robinson and Duke Snider.

Right, did you get to Ebbets Field ever?

JW- Yes. That was a thrill for us, you know, like in the 40s and the 50s. We would take a trip to Ebbets Field to see the Dodgers play. So, I grew up just being a baseball fan.

Right. So you started playing in the Little League in Elizabeth and the other things as kids grow up?

JW- Yeah, sandlot baseball, you know, where you just get a bunch of guys together in the neighborhood and choose sides. I think growing up we must have participated in that activity, you know, almost daily. You know, like as we became teenagers and were eligible more or less for baseball leagues, we formed little teams together like different clubs and then we started playing like organized baseball and high school baseball.

What high school did you go to?

JW- I went to then it was Thomas Jefferson High School in Elizabeth.

OK, and you played for that high school? What position did you play?

JW- I used to play shortstop.

OK, and how did you do in high school?

JW- Well, my senior year I was All State. I did pretty good.

It sounds like it. How was your team? How was the school?

JW- It was an all boys school so they quite an athletic program there and I think we were State Champions in 1955 and I think we won the Greater Newark Tournament. We won the Union County Tournament so we had a pretty good squad. I think off that team in 1955 I think there were four of us that signed professional contracts with the Detroit Tigers. There was a pitcher by the name of Richard Jones. An outfielder by the name of Jesse Queen. Another infielder by the name of Bill Bennett. They all signed professional contracts and I happened to be the only one that was fortunate enough to reach the level of the major leagues.

Do you know the name of the scout that signed you?

JW- Irving K. "Rabbit" Jacobsen.

He was obviously with Detroit.

JW- He was a Detroit scout.

Now, when did you get signed? Right out of high school?

JW- No, Rabbit, he encouraged me to go to college. I went from 1955 to the middle of 1957, but my heart was just into like playing baseball.

The scout encouraged you to go to college? Where did you go?

JW- I went to Delaware State College in Dover, Delaware. As a matter of fact, you know, he paid my tuition and everything to go, you know with the insurance that if I decided, whenever I decided to play baseball, he would sign me to a contract. So, in the winter, January 1957, he signed me to my first professional contract and to this day, Rabbit has retired, maybe about 20 years ago and you know, he lives in West Palm Beach, Florida yet we still remain very, very close.

I can see why you would.

JW- We stay in contact. Quite naturally, I haven't seen him, but we write each other.

So, you went to Delaware State and you stayed there how long?

JW-A year and a half.

And you played for the team?

JW- I played for the team.

And how'd you do there?

JW- I hit over .400.

It sounds like you did good. So then what happened?

JW- So then I signed a professional contract in 1957 and my first assignment was in Erie, Pennsylvania

What league was that?

JW- That was in the New York-Penn League at that particular time.

Yeah.

JW- Then in 1958 I played in the Carolina League with Durham and also with Idaho Falls in the Pioneer League. In 1959 I played with Fox Cities in the Three-I League and part of the season in the Sally League with Knoxville. In 1960 with the Denver Bears in the American Association.

Let me ask you. The first team that you played for again was Erie, Pennsylvania? Now, by the time you made it to the Sally League, would you contrast the caliber of play. Was there a noticeable difference as you moved up those two ends of the spectrum in the minors?

JW- Oh yeah. Every year it was a learning experience because like when you first start. You know, most of the guys were young, right out of high school. The big difference I guess, you know when you're in high school, the competition, the level of competition, like the teams that you faced, you may face guys who, maybe one or two or three guys who maybe have the potential of being professional baseball players. But then when you become a professional you got to realize that these guys are equal or better than you because it's a combination of talent. You know, young.

Top to bottom, you have good ballplayers where in the lower levels you might have one or two.

JW- One or two. So then as you progress up in the minor leagues, the higher you get, the more experience you are facing.

What are your memories of the minor league teams that you played on? People talk about the bus rides, the small ballparks, the...

JW- Bad lights.

Among other things. Low pay.

JW- But, for me it was something that was quite enjoyable because if you love the game, you know, initially when you first start, that's all you want to do.

Get between the white lines and start playing.

JW- Play the game.

The other stuff is unimportant.

JW- Just play the game. When you meet guys that are in the same shoes as you, like Dick McAuliffe, who played for the Tigers for a long period of time, you know he was on the first squad in Erie, Pennsylvania. And you develop like friendships, you know, that just last for a lifetime.

Who was some of your other teammates in the minor leagues? Do you recall some of your managers?

JW- My first manager was a gentleman by the name of Charlie Kress, who was a first baseman in the Tiger organization. I think he played with Cincinnati or Philadelphia. And Johnny Pesky, who was a shortstop for the Red Sox for quite a number of years. Al Lakeman. Charlie Metro. Basically, those were the guys that were part of my development.

Right. Anyone that you would single out as the one you learned the most from, or just a group of people that you picked up a little from here and a little from there?

JW- You know, with the different personalities and the different levels that you play in, you pick up certain things from each and every one of them because as individuals, they have different styles of managing and you just...

OK, how'd did you come up to the Tigers then, in '61? You started spring training with the Tigers in '61?

JW- Yeah, well in the winter of 1960, I had a pretty good year. I hit over .300 in the American Association.

That's with Denver?

JW- Yeah, with Denver. I led the league in triples. And the Tigers during the winter traded their second baseman, who was Frank Bolling at the time.

Traded him to Milwaukee, didn't they?

JW- For a centerfielder by the name of Billy Bruton.

Billy Bruton, yeah?

JW- So, it was an opportunity. I went to spring training and they had also acquired a second baseman by the name of Chuck Cottier from the Milwaukee organization. During the spring, I had the opportunity to start off spring training with Detroit and I had a marvelous spring training and I started the season with Detroit in '61. I think, like the squad that we had, I mean, we won over 100 games.

It was 103. Let me ask you about 1961. You were obviously excited. You were a rookie in the bigs. You had a pretty good rookie year. I know you led the league in triples. Do you recall that? You had 14 triples, thirty stolen bases. That's nice, right? You were on a good team. Of course, the Yankees steamrolled the American League. Do you remember your first ballgame in the majors?

JW- Yeah, it was quite memorable to me because I hit a home run.

In your first game? First at bat?

JW- No, I think it was the fourth at bat, off of Jim Perry from the Cleveland Indians.

In Detroit?

JW- In Detroit. In the upper deck.

Wow, that's obviously memorable. Do you recall your first game in New York? Did your family come and see you play and all that?

JW- Yeah, I think some organization had given us a bus ride to honor the fact that someone from Elizabeth was playing in the big leagues and my mother and father was in attendance in that game and quite a number of my relatives and friends.

Friends that you hadn't seen in a long, long time, right?

JW- Yeah, you know the guys that I grew up with, so it was quite an event. I can't recall, you know, whether we won or whether we lost. But, I know it was exciting.

In 1961 goes along nicely for you. As I said, you led the led the league in triples, thirty stolen bases, you bat pretty well, I believe like 270, something to that effect. I think you had a couple of votes for Rookie of the Year. I believe it was won by a game named Don Schwall, I think in 1961.

JW- A pitcher from Boston.

A pitcher from Boston, right. The Tigers were in the race until sometime in September, despite the fact that the Yankees were such a great team, the Tigers were in the pennant race so you had it all at once.

JW- Right, I think in the early part of September we went to Yankee Stadium about a game and a half out of first place and as I recall, I think the Yankees swept us in New York and then we went to Baltimore and Boston and by the time the dust cleared, I think we were eight games out.

The Yankees didn't lose. So, the year ended pretty nicely. You're on a second place team, over a hundred games. So, you start then in '62 and I'm sure you're juiced up and ready to go again, right.

JW- Yeah, but they say the sophomore jinx or whatever. It did seem like that particular year was a difficult one for me because things just didn't fall into place although we had a relatively good team, but things just didn't jell.

They didn't work as good as in 1961.

JW- Yeah.

You still didn't have a real bad year, as I recall. Your batting average was down but you still stole like eighteen bases. You still had a fairly good year and you played a majority of your games at second for Detroit, right?

JW- Right, You know many years ago when I was a lot younger, I could run. I think that was one of my biggest assets. My speed and you know and enjoying the game itself and I think like over the course, you know, when you're growing up and you play baseball, you know maybe two or three times a week, it's fun but when you do it a hundred and sixty two times, you know, you really have to love it although there's a lot of peaks and valleys and when you are in the big leagues, they may call it a sport, but it's also a business. The pressures that are on baseball

players although, it's still enjoyment, I think the business aspect sometimes just overwhelms some of the players.

Right, I'm sure it does. Do you know what the minimum pay was back then?

JW- I think the minimum pay then was like \$7500.

And that's probably what you got in 1961?

JW- Yep.

After a rookie year like that, did you have trouble getting a raise?

JW- Nah, you know. It wasn't much of a raise, but it was a raise.

Did you get an award or any kind of recognition for leading the league in triples? Do you get anything at all?

JW- Nah.

Nothing. They give you nothing. After '62, your playing time declined for a few years after that.

JW- Well, I got injured and I tore the tendons in my finger in '63 and I think the Tigers had acquired a veteran second baseman by the name of Jerry Lumpe from Kansas City so he played a majority of the games at second base and I think then, from '63 on, I played various positions, second base, a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

Which did you prefer to play? Did you like second?

JW- Second base.

By '67, I think your playing time with the Tigers decreased even after the injury. Was it your injury, or just that they felt that Lumpe was better? You mentioned Dick McAuliffe before. I know he eventually made the Tigers by '67 I suspect.

JW- I think Dick was with us prior to that but he used to play shortstop and a little bit of third base and in '67 they sent me down to the minor leagues to their farm club in Toledo and from there I went to the Cincinnati Reds so that particular, I guess then, McAuliffe started played regular second base because I think he was the second baseman in '68 when they won.

When they won everything.

JW- The World Series.

So, you went to the minors and from the minors to Cincinnati?

JW- Yes.

Yes, by this time, were you looking forward to going to Cincinnati? How did you feel about that?

JW- Well, my old manager, the reason that I got to Cincinnati, Charlie Metro, who was my manager in Denver, was instrumental in me going to Cincinnati because I think he was a scout for the Cincinnati Reds and I think one of their infielders, I think Leo Cardenas was injured, at that particular time so I became a member of the Cincinnati Reds by a minor trade or whatever. I stayed with them a couple of months and then I got back in the Detroit Tiger organization. In 1968, I went in the Cleveland Indians organization because I played at Portland in their Triple A club.

In the PCL?

JW- Right, the Pacific Coast League. That's where I tore the tendons in my wrist and I tried to play. In 1969 I played with the Tigers Double A baseball club in Montgomery, Alabama. By then, being able not to do some of the things that you're used to doing even though I was young. Heck, I was only thirty or thirty-one years old.

You would almost be considered in your prime.

JW- Right.

Right, so now injuries took their toll and now you're in Double A, so that must have been a real step down, huh?

JW- Back on those bus rides from where I originally started like after the taste of seven years in the big leagues, you know...

Big difference.

JW- Big difference. Plus I had like a wife and two children. So instead of my career spiraling upward, you know, it was going downward so I just got out.

So you got out from Double A with Cleveland? Is that what you're saying?

JW- Detroit.

OK, the last thing you said was that you were with Portland.

JW- That was in 1968.

And then in '69, you were back in Detroit's organization?

JW- Right. In Montgomery.

Oh, Montgomery, right, you said that, yeah. So you finished the season with Montgomery?

JW- I finished the season with Montgomery and I called it quits.

You packed it in.

JW- Right.

Did you stay active in the game, in coaching or any other facet of it?

JW- Not on a professional level. You know, I tinkered around playing softball but nah. Various softball leagues, you know, slow pitch, but not any baseball.

OK, let me ask you about a couple of major league managers. You first manager was Bob Sheffing. Do you got anything that you could share about Bob Sheffing?

JW- Uh...

Well, you come up with him, so...

JW- You know, I have to have a fondness for the first manager, you know that showed some confidence in me in being like, you know, a rookie, and then have confidence, enough confidence in me to have me play 162 games. So heck, he has a special place in my heart. You know, Bob Sheffing.

How would you describe him as a manager? Was he quiet? Was he talkative?

JW- He was a quiet sort of manager. He let you play the game. There was only two rookies on that '61 team, you know, myself and Steve Boros, the third baseman. The rest of the guys, there was quite a blend of guys who had been in the game for quite a while. You know, Norm Cash and Chico Fernandez and Rocky Colavito and Billy Bruton and Don Mossi and Frank Lary and Jim Bunning. You know, Hank Aguirre. I think the catcher we had, Gus Triandos. Most of the time, and we had a very, very successful year, so most of the time...

When you win a hundred games, it's pretty nice.

JW- Yeah, it was filling out the lineup card.

Filling out the lineup card. Contrast him with Charlie Dressen.

JW- Charlie Dressen was a fiery type of manager. He still, I guess, was reminiscent of the old Dodgers.

Of '51, he was reminiscent.

JW- The old Dodgers days. So, I guess he tried to bring a little of that to Detroit, but I guess we had different types of personalities.

Was Sheffing fired and that's how Dressen became the manager? He came in '63.

JW- In between Bob Sheffing we had Mayo Smith.

Later on, Mayo Smith you had in '67.

JW- Oh, that was Mayo. I thought it was in between.

You had Bob Swift and Frank Skaff in '66 after Dressen.

JW- After Dressen passed away.

Oh, he passed away? Alright. Do you remember Bob Swift or Frank Skaff? Do you remember either of those guys?

JW- Well see, they were part of my minor league experience.

So you knew them already?

JW- I knew them already because, like growing up in the minor leagues there was Bob Swift. Frank Skaff was a minor league manager. Guys like Wayne Blackburn, Stubby Overmire, so I grew up with these guys, like when I became a member of the major league club, they were like coaches, they was just like part of the family. The only guys that I was unfamiliar with was like Don Heffner who was our first base coach and George Myatt because they came from another organization to Detroit. But, you know, like I said, the other ones, I just grew up with them.

So, how about Mayo Smith? Do you remember him much?

JW- Yeah, I recall Mayo. He brought a lot of..., you know, a different type of experience to Detroit because I think he had managed quite a number of years before he had gotten there. And all of them, they had uniqueness as far as their style was concerned. That's why they make changes, because of the different styles.

Let me ask you. In '68 when the Tigers won the World Championship, did you have any thoughts about it and the fact that you might have been on that team? Did that enter your mind?

JW- No. No. You feel good for the guys.

Your teammates?

JW- Right. You know, because to me, there is no better fraternity than like baseball players. Regardless of if you're there or you're not there. You know, you wish them well.

Right. Let me ask you about a few of your teammates, OK? You can give me some stories or memories or thoughts, reflections. You mentioned the late Norm Cash, who led the league in hitting one year. He was a good player. He died unfortunately a young man. What do you remember about Norm Cash?

JW- A jokester. One of them guys. Him and Frank Lary liked to pull a lot of practical jokes on different guys.

Did he get on rookies?

JW- Yeah, that was a normal thing.

Rookies always got it though.

JW- Always some sort of mild harassment but it was all done in good nature.

So, he was a jokester, a practical joker.

JW- How about Rocky Colavito, a big slugger?

JW- Rocky...

Grew up in New York.

JW- A gentleman, but on the baseball field, very intense. Fiery. He always gave a 110%.

He could hit the ball a long way. A good arm, too.

JW- A very nice man. You know, Al Kaline, very quiet but intense, but a professional out there on that baseball field.

Completely, as they say today, the big word is focused, you're looking for.

JW- Yeah.

How about Billy Bruton? He came over from the Braves, I think, a centerfielder.

JW- That was my roommate. We roomed together for about three years I imagine until I think he retired in '64 or '65.

So you got close to Billy Bruton?

JW- Yeah. When you room with someone and you become, you know their wives and their children, so there's a connection there that even I think about three or four years ago he called me and I got a chance to go down and visit him in Wilmington, Delaware. So, there's relationships that are developed, like I said before, that last a lifetime.

How about Denny McLain? He was there at the end of your time with the Tigers? Do you recall Denny?

JW- Yep. He was there. That was one of my card playing partners. I think there was a group of us that just loved to play pinochle. You know, Gates Brown, Denny McLain, and Ray Oyler. That was our pastime when we used to travel like on a plane. Like when you used to go back to the hotel and playing pinochle and you know, laughing, ribbing each other in a good natured way.

Was it obvious that Denny was going to be a good pitcher in those early days? Did you see that in him?

JW- He didn't lack any confidence in himself and that's what I remember most about him.

Very confident.

JW- Very, very confident.

Cocky, almost.

JW- Cocky.

How about Frank Lary, the Yankee killer, as he was called?

JW- Yeah. He was very like, an aggressive type of pitcher. You know, when he went out on the mound, you knew he was there. I think the first year he won 23 games for the Tigers. He was the type of pitcher that all you had to do was just give him the ball. You never worried about how far he was going. You know he was out there for the duration. He would give you 150%. Guys like him and Jim Bunning. You know, like Mickey Lolich.

Tough competitors.

JW- Tough competitors.

How about Mickey Lolich, hero of the '68 Series? Was he one of those guys who was intense, too? Focused and all that kind of thing?

JW- Yeah. Mickey was not, I'll say, like a quiet intenseness on the mound. You know, some guys are intense but they are vocal about it. He was one of those non-vocal guys who was very intense.

Let me ask you back about Frank Lary. I called him the Yankee killer before, was he aware of that fact that he beat the Yankees a lot. Was that ever talked about by either him or any of your teammates?

JW- Nah.

But he did. He had an amazing record against the Yankees. I was just curious.

JW- I never heard him mention it. But, I guess, it's just like newspapers and writers and things. They write about certain things. But, you know, that's the beauty about the game of baseball. Regardless of what's on the paper, you gotta play the game.

True. How about Willie Horton? He came up about, maybe your last year or so with the Tigers, Willie Horton.

JW- OK, he came up in about '65 I think. He was quite young.

Right.

JW- I think the first time he came up, they sent him back down to the minors like after maybe a couple months because sometimes guys, who are expected to produce big numbers, sometimes they add a little extra pressure on themselves. I think that's what initially happened to Willie. Sometimes, I guess like doing anything, you just have to let nature take its course and not try to do things that you're not capable of doing. Not that he wasn't capable of doing what he did, but you just have to learn how to relax and do it.

And the talent will come up. He was certainly a good ballplayer. How about Jim Bunning? What type of a guy was Jim Bunning? Do you remember anything about him? Could you have seen him at that time being a congressman?

JW- Nah. He was an intelligent individual. I never pictured him being in politics. But, he was a very intelligent individual who was the ultimate professional out there on the mound. I think his record speaks for itself. He won over a hundred games in each league. So, he was a durable guy who gave all he had. Once he walked across those white lines.

Billy Bruton was your closest friend on the Tigers, then?

JW- Yeah, like in my earlier years and then after he retired I started rooming with Gates Brown.

Right, pinch hitter extraordinaire. What kind of a guy was Gates?

JW- Gates was the type of guy, like from his background, if you didn't know him, he seemed sort of gruff. Once you got to know him, he would give you the shirt off his back. We did become quite close and after I had retired and left the game, he was a member of the coaching staff with the Tigers. You know, when the Tigers used to come into town and they used to go to Baltimore, I used to visit. I miss that. But then after his tour with the Tigers was over, there was nobody left as far as a closeness.

Right. Your time with the Reds. You didn't have a real long, you only had a short period of time with them. Did you get to know any of your Reds teammates? I know they had Pete Rose and Johnny Bench and Tony Perez and Lee May and Vada Pinson, Alex Johnson.

JW- No. I don't think Alex Johnson was there at that particular time. But, you know. Quite naturally, you know, when you go to another organization and you don't have the same type of relationships that you had established over five or ten years with someone else. It's still the game of baseball and the object is to win the game. Like with 25 guys. That's always an established fact, you know. Some guys you become close to and some you don't. But the object is to win.

Right, the guys at Cincinnati you didn't get to know too well because you were a new guy.

JW- But you still...

You still knew them.

JW- You know them.

But not well.

JW- Right. Some of the guys, I think the closest one on that team that I became close to was like Floyd Robinson because he had come from the White Sox. I knew him because we played against one another.

Yeah, you're going to a different league.

JW- So I guess him going to another league and I going to another league, but we're familiar with each other.

You played against each other, like you said. OK, you said how you finally came to an end. What's your feeling about the game of baseball, today? Do you follow it? What's your opinion of it? Do you watch a lot of games? Follow closely?

JW- Ah, not closely because growing up and relating to a team, I told you I was a Dodger fan. And back then the teams are basically like the same, year in and year out. Now, with the free agent rule, guys move around a lot so it's kind of difficult for me to say I would be a Dodger fan and Duke Snider is playing with the you know, the Yankees or Pee Wee Reese is with the Giants. It's difficult.

It's transient.

JW- It's difficult for me right now to say. I am a baseball fan, not of one team.

Right, I understand that. Not of one team. What's your opinion now about the state of the game now? How do you view it to when you played? Do you think the caliber of play is better? Do you think it's worse?

JW- I won't say like it's worse. The guys today are tremendous ballplayers. I think sometimes that the more you add on to a product, I won't say that the quality dilutes itself. I think like the game when it comes to a facet like pitching, for example, you know how many major league quality pitchers can you have when you keep adding on?

Adding teams? Expansion.

JW- You keep expanding. But, I think some of the ballplayers, a majority of them that are playing right now are tremendous ballplayers. Hey, they are bigger and stronger. I don't know what they are eating. They are faster because the record speaks for itself.

Do you think the game is, you mentioned the business aspect before. That seems to make the front page now as much as the results of the game. Is that the same now as it was back when you played or do you think the business aspect now is getting more of the headlines in between the lines?

JW- I think it's getting more now. Right now, during the off-season all your lead is how teams are going to make the adjustment not due to the lack of talent but salary structure. You can see it doing the course of the year like when teams are now doing as well as I guess they've projected.

A big consideration is how much they're making so you've got to move guys around, get guys out, get guys in, that kind of thing.

JW- It used to be when you looked at a player and the contribution that he's making now, you look at a guy when he reaches a certain salary level, instead of becoming an asset, you know, he comes a detriment.

I guess so. You said you were a Dodger fan. Did you ever get to meet any of the Brooklyn Dodgers that you told me that you used to watch as a kid?

JW- Oh yeah. Carl Erskine. Johnny Podres. He became a teammate of mine. My first year of spring training, Gil Hodges because he was the manager of the Washington Senators. Duke Snider, I think was an original member of the Mets. Joe Black, even though he was not involved in baseball, but he was active. I think he was the Vice President of Greyhound so though my traveling I met him. Roy Campanella. I think he visited some of the spring training camps and during the off-season when they have baseball dinners that I'd get an opportunity to attend, I met some of those gentleman. So growing up and seeing these guys perform and then having the opportunity to perform with them in an instant was quite a thrill for me.

I'll bet it was. The last thing I'll ask you is what you recall about Tiger Stadium. Was it your favorite place to play? If it wasn't what was your favorite ballpark to play in?

JW- Always have an affection for home.

Any other parks you liked particularly?

JW- I don't know. I just seemed to do quite well in Comiskey Park in Chicago. Although they had pretty good teams, it just seemed like the ball was just bigger to me. The Kansas City ballpark was always well, well manicured. Fenway Park was a favorite. Yankee Stadium was, with its history, awesome. You know, just going there. Just the idea that a lifelong, boyhood dream became a reality was when you walk out on the field. Whether it be Municipal Stadium in Cleveland or Fenway Park in Boston or Comiskey Park or Wrigley Field in the old Los Angeles area. It was quite a thrill.

I bet that was.

-Transcribed by J. Thomas Hetrick, June, 2006.