



Memories from the late Chuck Tanner

By Mark Liptak

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The 2013 White Sox were to say the least, a bad baseball team. White Sox fans of a certain generation have seen this movie before. In 1968, 1969 and 1970, the franchise had the worst three year stretch in team history. They lost 295 games and were rumored to be heading to Milwaukee.

Only two years later they had won 87 games in a strike shortened season. In a short period of time, things turned completely around. How did it happen? Well the Sox brought in two dynamic baseball savvy men to run things, Roland Hemond to fulfill general manager duties (even though he did not carry the title) and Chuck Tanner as field manager. The two men were willing to take risks, follow with conviction their ideas of how a team should be built and stressed the fundamentals of the game.



Chuck Tanner (left) and Dick Allen made for a dynamic duo at the heart of the 1972 White Sox.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Chuck Tanner in Oct. 2005 as we both watched the White Sox win their first World Series since 1917. Tanner was 78 that fall. In that era, he was a special assistant for the Pirates. He'd pass away on Feb. 11, 2011. To that day Chuck was appreciative of the White Sox organization for giving him a chance. The interview I did with him was pure unadulterated Chuck.

Mark Liptak: You played a part in one of the most memorable games in Sox history as a player. Sept. 22, 1959...the Sox are in Cleveland needing one win to take the pennant. You played in that game as an Indians outfielder. Tell me about it, the atmosphere and the memories. (Author's Note: Chuck played in the major leagues from 1955 through 1962 with the Braves, Cubs, Indians and Angels.)

Chuck Tanner “I came up to bat that night as a pinch hitter. (Author’s Note: It was in the 5th inning.) I worked the count to 3-2 and must have fouled off about a dozen pitches. I just kept slapping off everything Early threw. Finally he must have got tired of fooling around because then he threw me a knuckleball which darted and dropped every which way and I swung and missed it. That shows you the type of competitor Early was. In a big game he had enough confidence to throw that pitch on 3-2 (Author’s Note: The Sox won the game and the pennant that night 4-2.)”

ML: You and Roland Hemond were hired at the same time by the White Sox to take over the operations of the club. How did that come about?

CT: “I was managing in Triple A for the Angels at Hawaii. Dick Walsh was the Angels’ GM and one night he called me and asked if I were managing the team what would I do to change things? I said I’d bring up Jim Spencer and Ken Tatum and we’d be fine. Dick said OK. I had always worked hard at developing the players under me to try to get them ready for the big leagues as opposed to just trying to win games so I’d advance in the farm system. It turns out that the Angels gave the (manager’s) job to ‘Lefty’ Phillips even though Gene Autry wanted me to have it. Roland was the Angels minor league farm director and he was upset. He called me and said ‘You should have gotten the job. From now on just win all you can win and don’t worry about anything else.’ I said ‘OK’ and started on that track. We started out 18-18 that season...we finished it 98-48, the best record in pro baseball anywhere.”

“We had gone to Tucson to play the White Sox Triple A team and while we were there, Glenn Miller, the Sox farm director, came over and said that Stu Holcomb, the Sox vice president, wanted to see me. So I met with him, we talked and he offered me the job. I said I wanted a three-year deal and he said the Sox would give me two years at \$40,000 a season. Naturally I took it.

“Then Roland came out and I said ‘What are you doing here?’ That’s when I found out that he had already been hired to run the GM side.”

ML: Chuck you knew the score going in, the Sox might have been the worst organization in major league baseball from 1968 through 1970. They had literally few fans, actually played some “home” games in Milwaukee, Comiskey Park was falling apart... it was a disaster. Why did you take the job? What if anything did you see that was positive about the move?

CT: “I was positive... that’s what was positive about the move. Me being in Chicago was a positive. I don’t mean that to sound arrogant but I had confidence in myself. I had managed in the minor leagues for eight years or so. I knew I could turn it around.”

ML: Was the team “mind set” the biggest challenge facing you when you showed up in Sarasota in Feb. 1971? I mean you had guys like Wilbur Wood who told me that things were so bad with the Sox the only games he ever wanted to pitch in was the ones where he could get a save since he said if the game was tied, everyone on the club knew the Sox were going to lose it.

CT: “The first thing I did was to work hard in spring training. We went through seven infield stations for 20 minutes each time, with five minutes’ break between them. We worked on fundamentals then, things like the run-down, the pick-off move. Then we’d take batting practice. Batting practice was always the last thing that we did during the day.

“The other thing and this was part of my ‘philosophy’ was that I told the guys that we’d take the best 25 players north every year, the guys who gave us the best chance to win. You look at the number of kids that came up when I was managing...Bucky Dent, Jorge Orta, Brian Downing, Terry Forster, Goose Gossage. People were always telling me, ‘You’ll ruin those kids, they aren’t ready.’ I’d say ‘I want the best 25 guys, I’ll manage them, and I’ll get them ready.’”

ML: I’ve interviewed a number of your former players, including guys like Chet Lemon, Mike Andrews, Ed Herrmann and Wilbur to name a few. To a man every one of them talked about the fact that they enjoyed playing for you and commented on your optimistic outlook no matter how bad things got. Where did that come from?

CT: “I grew up that way. My mother and father had that type of attitude and I remember them telling me that whatever you do, have fun with it or else there’s no sense in doing it in the first place. That attitude stayed with me regardless of what I played growing up, baseball, football, basketball or track.”

ML: I’ve also always heard the phrase a “player’s manager” used with you. What is a “player’s manager?”

CT: “To me it means a few things. If the players keep trying no matter how bad things are, that I won’t leave them or turn on them. A ‘player’s manager’ has the ability to communicate to let each player know where they stand. It also means that I would pick the spots to play them where they would have the very best chance to succeed both for themselves and for the good of the team.”

ML: You could be very, very tough when you needed to be. Ed Herrmann talked about the time he screwed up and had to pay a visit to your office. He said he remembers that to this day. That the sound of your voice came through your office and everyone heard it in the locker room. What did you always demand of your players?



Harry Caray (left) and Chuck Tanner often were at odds over Caray's broadcast comments. But here, they were getting along just fine.

CT: “I didn’t demand a lot of things...basically that they just gave me the best effort they had. That’s all. I wanted my players to hustle, to break up the double play, to know how to get a good lead off first base and then on a hit to be able to get to third base. The media in Chicago would ask me, ‘What are your rules?’ I’d say I’ve got 25 of them, one for each player. They’d be shocked and say how can you do that? I’d say I can do it because I’ll be the strongest guy in that locker room. The players will do what I ask or they won’t be with me.”

ML: On Dec. 2, 1971 the White Sox made a deal that according to many, including you, saved the franchise. The Sox got Dick Allen from the Dodgers for Tommy John and Steve HUNTZ. How much input did you have in the deal because in many respects it was a gamble?

CT: “Roland and I talked about anything that we were going to do. He came up to me and said “I think we can get Dick Allen in a deal, what do you think?” I said, ‘(Bleep), I’d take him in a second, he’s a good person and a great player, do the deal.’ And we did. Really it wasn’t a gamble at all.”

ML: Hemond told me that one important reason he made the trade was because of your relationship with Dick and more importantly Dick’s mother. How did you know the Allen family?

CT: “I knew Dick and his family from when he and his younger brothers were little kids. I played ball against his older brother who was a great athlete. The Allen family only lived about 20 minutes from where I lived. I had known Dick for years.”

ML: I’ve heard before he signed, Allen showed up in Sarasota and watched from beyond the center field fence for a few days, then discussed things with his mom and that it was his mom who said because of their relationship with you for a number of years, that Dick owed you the benefit of the doubt and he reported.

CT: “I never knew that Dick showed up and was watching us. I got along well with his family and maybe that helped but the biggest reason that I thought we worked well together was because I respected him and his ability. One example was that when we were demonstrating how to get a proper lead off first base I’d say to Dick, ‘You show ‘em how to take the right lead’ and he did. Dick was a natural leader... he knew exactly how to get the right lead, he never made a mistake on the bases, he played almost every game and had the greatest individual year I ever saw out of any player I ever managed. And all of the young guys that we had on the team respected him and watched every move he made, kids like Dent and Downing and Gossage.”

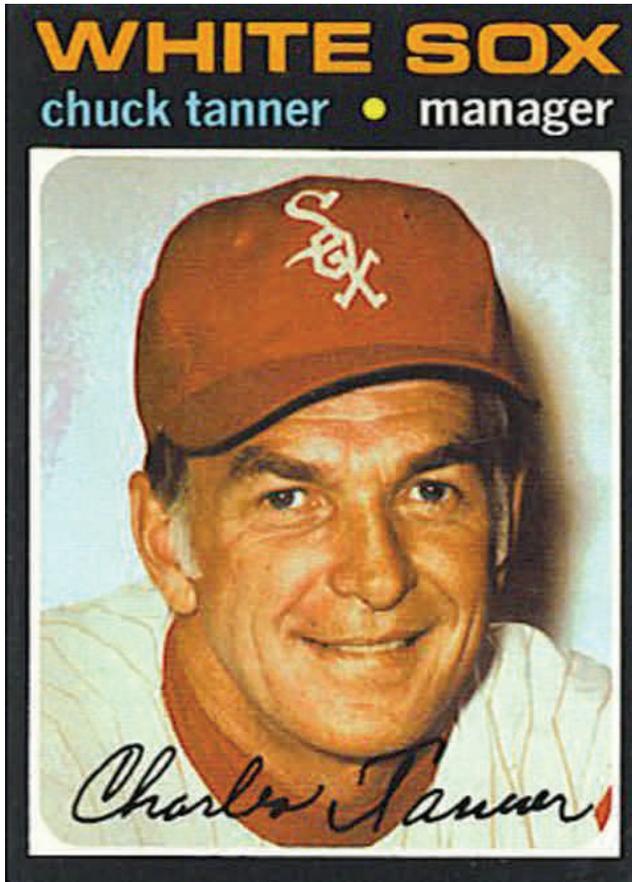
ML: 1972 was an amazing season what with Dick playing at an MVP pace while Wilbur Wood was a legit Cy Young candidate. At what point did you say to yourself, “We can win this thing even though no one expects us to...”

CT: “When we came out of spring training I thought we were going to be good because we had three top pitchers in Wilbur, Stan Bahnsen and Tom Bradley. Johnny Sain and I told them the same thing we told Wilbur, ‘We’re going to pitch the (bleep) out of you

and you can make a lot of money because you can win a lot of games.’ Stan thought it over and said OK, although he also said, ‘You know, I could also lose 20 games! (laughing).’

ML: If Bill Melton doesn’t have a herniated disc and go on the DL in June do the Sox win the division?

CT: “Damn right we win it, we were right there and that’s not saying anything bad about Ed Spiezio who did a fine job for us.”



Chuck Tanner first 1971 Topps baseball card as Sox manager.

from the vibrations. I’ve never seen that before in my life. When I was in the locker room I looked at Dick and got chills, I still do thinking about it. He was at his locker undressing and to him it was just another day. He did some amazing things.

“People don’t know how good of a leader Dick was. We decided to send down Jorge Orta for a few weeks that season, because we needed help in another area. Jorge was young, spoke very little English and was devastated because he thought he wasn’t going to be brought back up. He was crying, saying in broken English, ‘But I have no money.

ML: To me the game that epitomized what the 1972 White Sox were about took place in the second game of a doubleheader versus the Yankees on June 4. It was the last of the ninth inning, the Sox trailed 4-2, they had two men on base, when you called on Allen to pinch hit. He drilled the third pitch from Sparky Lyle into the left center-field seats for a White Sox winner. I was sitting in right field and the crowd reaction was incredible. The fans refused to leave the park and I thought I read a comment from you saying that the inside of the Sox locker room was shaking because of the crowd. Take us into the locker room after that hit.

CT: “Dick was our leader and I remember that day very well. Mike Andrews told me what he said to Lyle as he was crossing the infield coming in to pitch. Mike and he were roommates with the Red Sox. Mike said to Sparky, ‘You’re in deep (bleep) now.’

“After the game, after the home run, the fans were so loud, so excited, that you could feel the locker room shake

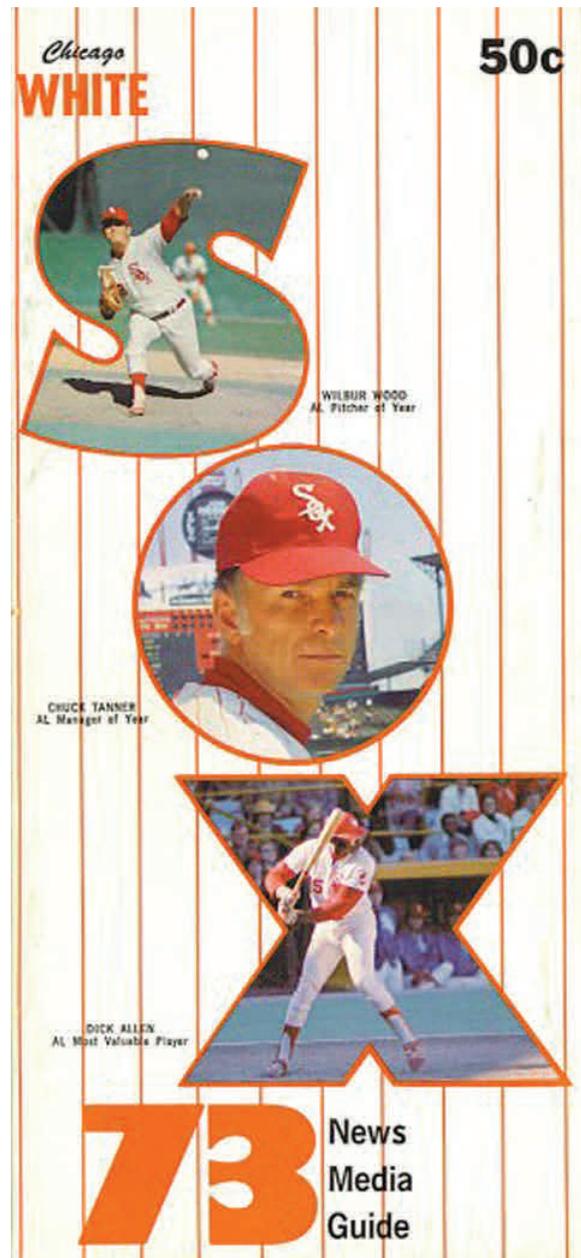
What will I do? Dick walked over to him, gave him \$1,500 right there and consoled him. The other players were stunned just watching it. That's what Dick Allen was all about."

ML: The Sox would end 1972 only 5 1/2 game behind the A's. In 1973 Melton was back. The Sox were favored and roared out of the gate, building up a 4 1/2 game lead by late May. But there were some major issues going on behind the scenes regarding yourself, Roland and then vice president Stu Holcomb over player contracts. When a Sox player couldn't or wouldn't agree to terms Holcomb ordered Hemond to release him.

CT: "Hell, I knew it in the spring that this stuff was going to go on. I told John Allyn the same thing when I talked with him. As a manager all you can do is the best you can. I don't know, maybe the Sox had money troubles at that time, I don't know if they had the money to pay these guys. It hurt us because we didn't have anybody left after the injuries."

ML: In the middle of Sept. 1974 Allen "retired" from the Sox. For what I understand it was pretty emotional in the clubhouse when he spoke with the team. Did you know that Dick was planning on leaving? Did you try to talk him out of it?

CT: "No, I'd never try to talk a player out of something like that and, no, I didn't know ahead of time he was leaving. He just came into my office with his spikes tied together and hung over his shoulder like you used to do as a kid and said, 'Lefty, that's it, I'm done.' I told him that I appreciated how hard he played for me and that I thought he had the greatest year anyone that I managed ever had. I knew he was really hurting. Dick had a very bad shoulder, he was coming off that broken leg (suffered in June 1973 in Anaheim) and he was tired. He was just tired of dealing with things like the media. There were a number of games where he shouldn't even have been playing but he was out there anyway."



The triad of top Sox personalities off the 1972 season: Wilbur Wood, Chuck Tanner and Dick Allen (Courtesy: Chicago White Sox).

ML: Was there any talk when Bill Veeck bought the club in Dec. 1975 that you were going to stay on? Or was it a foregone conclusion that you were leaving?

CT: “They wanted me to stay. I got a call from Paul Richards and he said, ‘You’re a better manager than I’ll ever be, the only reason I’m doing this is because Bill is into the nostalgia thing, I’d like you to stay and be my third-base coach, it’ll only be for a year. I’ll get you more money. You can coach; you can be a vice president of the club if you want to.’

“I went to a meeting at Comiskey Park to talk about this. Bill said, ‘I’m not letting him go...’and pointed to me. It was interesting but I said, ‘I don’t know.’ I just didn’t think it was right for me. Then I heard from Charlie Finley. His people said that Charlie said ‘If they don’t hire him, I want to meet with him.’ That’s what happened and Charlie gave me a three-year contract.”