



Popular ex-Sox catcher Ed Herrmann in fight of his life

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Friday, September 6th, 2013*

Leave it an old road roomie to take the true measure of a man.

“He’s knows what’s going on,” Bill Melton said of Ed Herrmann. “He’s handled this like he’s handled everything. He’s a happy person: ‘What are you going to do?’”

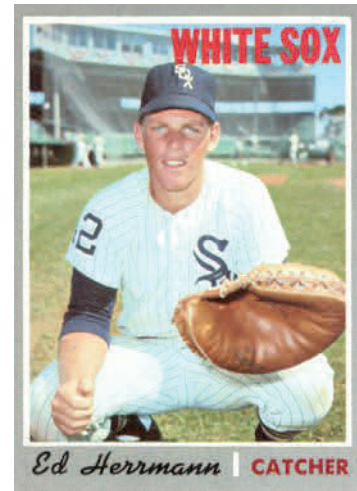
That attitude combined with strong faith has steered Herrmann and his family through the toughest challenge of his life. The former White Sox catcher, one of the leaders of the memorable 1972 near-miss team, has been in an induced coma in a San Diego hospital as doctors try to stabilize his condition. Herrmann suffered from prostate cancer for several years, but the disease has spread to his bones.

Melton knows his oldest friend in baseball better than most, but he’s also realistic. He believes Herrmann, 67, has only limited time left. You could hear Melton, now Sox pre- and post-game TV analyst for Comcast SportsNet Chicago, wince over the phone when he tells of the attempts to bring Herrmann to consciousness.

“They keep waking him up, but when he is (awake), he’s in a lot of pain,” Melton said.

“I don’t want to see him in pain.”

Barbara Herrmann, Ed’s wife, has continually updated his condition on Facebook. And old ties still bind. Mark Liptak, senior correspondent for the White Sox Interactive news site, said the likes of Dick Allen and Seventies Sox general manager Roland Hemond have reached out to Herrmann’s family. Allen paid tribute to Herrmann, who revived his old nickname “Hoggy,” with comments at www.DickAllen15.com, his own web site.



Ed Herrmann looked very young in his 1970 baseball card. Photo credit whitesox-interactive.com.

Allen pays tribute to Herrmann

“Ed was one of the very best I ever played with at blocking the plate, a real tough guy,” Allen wrote. “When we used to kid him about his running speed, he would respond, ‘I am built for endurance, not speed.’”

“The most impressive thing about Ed Herrmann...he loved the game. Even when he was given a day off from catching, he would go out to work with the pitchers in the bullpen.”

Ex-batterymate Jim Kaat contacted the Baseball Assistance Team (BAT) to see if they could help with expenses. Barbara Herrmann recently said her husband’s medication cost \$2,000 a month. The family has set up an on-line fundraiser at www.YouCaring.com.



Ed Herrmann (left) and Bill Melton (right) welcome Dick Allen after he signed with the Sox in 1972.

"I know that Ed has been fighting the prostate condition for at least the past few years," Liptak said. "I remember him telling me that they discovered it early and he went in for treatment. It went into remission, but like a lot of cancers, unfortunately it came back. It seems like he's been going through one thing after another over the past year. The doctors will get a handle on one aspect of the illness but something else will pop up."

"I can only imagine what this has been like for Ed and his family. It can't be easy to go through or to cope with. But

from what I know Ed is a real fighter, he's got that football-mentality towards this and won't give up, that's for sure."

Herrmann was a man comfortable with himself and his mortality. Hearing of his illness, Melton wanted to make the short trip from the Phoenix area to San Diego at mid-winter to visit his buddy. Instead, Herrmann came to him – at Sox spring training in Glendale.

“We got a call and he said he wanted to see a game,” Melton said. “Eddie said he wanted to do his bucket list. He was up in the booth for a couple of innings. It was a struggle to sit. It was in his ribs.”

Some 3,000 miles away in the Boston area, longtime batterymate Wilbur Wood had

been out of touch about Herrmann's illness. He was stunned to hear about his condition.

"He was such a happy-go-lucky guy," said Wood. "When you hear something like this, it's shocking. He's not the type of person who deserves something of this nature. A lot of people go through it. It's just a shame when it happens to such a likeable guy like Ed."

Talk about Herrmann doesn't linger on his present woes. He loved life and baseball far longer than life turned on him, even with previous tragedies like son Jimmy being paralyzed in a motorcycle accident.

"He still threw batting practice at age 65," Melton said of Herrmann's kinetic energy at the annual Sox Fantasy Camp.

Herrmann won over more friends at Fantasy Camp

The camp was the perfect outlet for Herrmann to see old teammates, swap stories and defy the ravages of age.

"I first met Ed when I started running our Fantasy Camp four years ago," said Bob Grim, the Sox's senior director of business development and broadcasting. "I had heard great things about him from Bill Melton. As you know, Melty and Ed are very close.

"Ed could not have been nicer to me in our first meeting. He never once mentioned to me that he was dealing with cancer. He never wanted anyone to know, as he is not the type of guy that wants anyone to feel sorry for him. Ed could always be heard in the camp clubhouse telling stories and making the campers feel like they were part of the White Sox family. I could tell Ed is a devoted family guy and the passion he has for baseball."

The rapport Melton and Herrmann had was recorded for posterity on the "Diamond Gems" radio show in 1994. A clip of Melton in the studio in northwest suburban Arlington Heights linked by phone with both Herrmann in San Diego and Wood in Boston was posted on the Chicago Baseball Museum web site. The segment can be accessed at www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/chicago-baseball-museum-media.php#Sox-Reunion.



Bill Melton, now Sox pre- and post-game CSN Chicago analyst, was Ed Herrmann's Sox roommate four decades ago. (Photo courtesy of CSN Chicago).

Herrmann just missed being an original Sox. Signed by the Milwaukee Braves – who actually underbid the Cubs for Herrmann’s services -- out of high school in June 1964, he was picked by the Sox the following November in the first-year draft. Five days after his 20th birthday, on Sept. 1, 1967, Herrmann made his big-league debut for a Sox team scrambling in the famed four-team American League race that season.

By 1969, his first full season, Herrmann began to seize playing time from incumbent catcher Duane Josephson. He solidified his hold on the job with a 19-homer, .283 season in just 333 plate appearances amid the forgettable 106-loss season in 1970. Those were impressive numbers for a young, left-handed hitting catcher at the time. Interestingly, Herrmann never approached those offensive numbers again as a Sox, yet made himself valuable in other ways with his defensive skills and leadership.

His toughest task was catching Wood’s dancing knuckleball, first in the latter’s role as closer, then through four straight 20-win seasons.

“He enjoyed doing it,” Wood said of catching the flutterball. “Not just mine. He came up through the organization. He caught (Hoyt) Wilhelm and (Eddie) Fisher prior to me, in spring training. Eddie did an outstanding job. Passed balls, he had very few.

“He had fun behind the plate. He’d get a laugh out of the umpire. He said to the umpire, ‘Where the hell was that pitch?’ And the ump would say, ‘My guess is as good as yours.’ Eddie had fun doing it. It wasn’t laborious to him.”

Herrmann’s leadership qualities really came together after Allen began boosting the Sox into contention in 1972.

“Ed was an essential cog for the 1972 White Sox team that nearly won the Western Division flag and saved the White Sox franchise from moving,” said Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum. “Ed was a

big factor in welcoming Allen to the White Sox after Dick’s spring training holdout and their friendship was a key ingredient to Allen’s MVP year.”

Herrmann missed out on the three-day ’72 team reunion centered on Allen 40 years later at U.S. Cellular Field, held by the Chicago Baseball Museum and the White Sox, due to a firm commitment to others in his life.



Mark Liptak, who has followed Ed Herrmann's story closely, speaks at the 40th anniversary celebration of the Dick Allen-led 1972 White Sox.

MDA commitment prevented '72 reunion visit

“A number of guys off that team came to Chicago to participate in it,” said Liptak, a speaker at the gala dinner at The Cell. “Dick and Hank Allen, Goose Gossage, Carlos May, Bill Melton, Bart Johnson, Tom Bradley, Ed Spiezio and Roland Hemond were there. I spoke with Ed a few times about this and he badly wanted to come, I'm sure he probably hadn't seen some of his former teammates in years.

“The reason Ed couldn't make it was because he was the chairman of the big Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) fund-raiser they were having in San Diego that weekend. One of the events was a golf tournament and someone bid \$3,000 to play in the group that included Ed. Ed told me that as much as he wanted to come to Chicago, he couldn't because he had to fulfill his obligations to the charity fund raiser.

“It was just the luck of the draw that the golf tournament and the anniversary celebration were on the same weekend. Other guys might have just said the heck with it and opted out of it. But Ed just wouldn't do that.”

Herrmann, Melton and others had fun when they played. One result was the jalopy-like little engine that could at old Comiskey Park – “The Big White Machine” – in 1970. Liptak got Herrmann to recall the story for White Sox Interactive several years back.



Ed Herrmann helped bring forth this distinctive jalopy that appeared at Old Comiskey Park in 1970. Photo credit whitesoxinteractive.com.

“Bill Melton and I were living in Oak Lawn and we became friends with a guy named Tom Buffo, who was the GM of Hawkinson Ford,” Herrmann told Liptak. “One day he talks to me and says we need to do something to promote the Sox. At the time Cincinnati’s ‘Big Red Machine’ was just starting up and he had the idea for a ‘Big White Machine.’

“I told him I didn’t have the time to get into a rebuilding project, but he said he knew where there was a shell of an old Ford roadster and it wouldn’t take a lot of work. So he and I and one of his mechanics pick

up this car body and start working on it. We completely cut the back off and put wood-painted panels around it. We left the front end open. The inside was just a seat and a gear shift and whenever we won a home game they’d fire it up and drive it around the park.

“Gene Bossard, the head groundskeeper, would go nuts because he was worried about it tearing up the field but it was only driven along the edges of the stands and on the

warning track. His son, Roger, would drive it and everybody loved it. It was a big hit. The front office though didn't like it at all... they thought we were making fun of the organization because we were so bad."

Eventually, Herrmann departed the White Sox for the Yankees at the close of spring training in 1975 as owner John Allyn, under the gun financially, began dismantling the Allen-era contender. But he always maintained his Sox connections. He has stayed in the alumni fold ever since.

"I feel over my years in this business, I have been a pretty good judge of character when it comes to judging people," Grim said. "I could tell in the short time I have gotten to know Ed, he is a genuine, loyal, fun loving person and some of his teammates have told me that certainly is the case with Ed. I only wish I got to know him over a longer period of time."