



No longer the ‘Milkman,’ Perry tries a pre-cast side to life

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Herbert Perry is no longer “The Milkman.”

And that’s not all bad. Things change.

One of the sparkplugs of the underloved, eventually -underperforming 2000 White Sox, Perry still has the ultimate old-school values and image even as his profession changes. A “Milkman” in honor of his family’s longtime dairy farm, the retired infielder now constructs from pre-cast moldings, then delivers septic tanks in an 80-mile radius around his panhandle Mayo, Fla., home amid very rural Lafayette County, home to just 3,000 souls.

A new nickname is not obvious for his latest unglamorous, earthy gig for Perry, just like nothing is as yet apparent for the Sox’s new stadium title sponsor of Guaranteed Rate. But the bottom lines never change for Perry. He is still an old-school country boy, a believer in hard work even after getting \$1 million-plus annual paydays in his final few years in the majors in the early 2000s.

Perry could take the easy way out, living on investments and baseball pension, and go off coaching somewhere. He is the sole driver for his business in delivering the concrete tanks. Meanwhile, he and wife Sheila own five public-storage facilities in the north Florida area. Back in the day, nobody would bat an eye at a former prominent player toiling in a workaday job a decade after his last at-bat.

Perry’s work ethic and roots in tiny Mayo made him a logical profilee in the country-boy archetype in my 2003 book “Throwbacks,” about big leaguers who fit in classic molds that always made us love the game. He had a rural upbringing out of another time, where farm chores dovetailed with baseball. Brother Chan Perry followed in his footsteps, also signing with the Cleveland Indians and enjoying a brief big-league career.



Herbert Perry provided a complementary bat to a powerful lineup for the 2000 White Sox (Photo courtesy of Chicago White Sox).

Now, he is still the same down-home Perry, but established in business almost as long as he played in the majors. His relative idleness in retirement lasted just two years, when he occupied his time coaching at the local high school.

“In 2007, my neighbor recommended I buy this pre-cast business,” Perry said the other day while on his delivery rounds. “And we all know sometime between 2007 and 2009 we had this pretty good recession in this country. It was tough, but we made it through. During that time, I learned how to drive a semi and deliver tanks. In 2010, I started delivering full-time, just myself. I got four or five deliveries today.”



Herbert Perry filled the hole at third base until departing for Texas as Joe Crede waited in the wings (Photo courtesy of Chicago White Sox).

“I never knew I would enjoy doing something like this. I enjoy getting up and doing things. This is a good business. We do pretty dang well.”

Perry can talk to you all day, and night if you let him, about business and baseball in his down-home accent. He played in an era when reporters, if they chose to do, could casually converse with players off-the-cuff for decent periods of time while both parties got to know each other. Now whatever media outlets are left covering baseball are herded into group interviews with total access significantly cut down.

Back in 2000, a visitor to Perry’s locker could hear all about the art of hitting from a man who grew up in a Cleveland Indians’ system backlogged with good hitters. The visitor could also be mentally transported to the middle of nowhere in Mayo and the Perry dairy business.

Mayo still is as country as they come in the Eastern time zone. But the cows have come home for good. The dairy was sold after the death of Perry’s father, Herbert, Sr., a decade ago. Lack of control over milk prices were hard on the small dairy operator. Consolidation of dairy farms into bigger, corporate-like operations, as with the rest of agriculture, has accelerated in a new century.

Perry did not have to totally retrain himself for his business. He has three employees who assemble the tanks, who then turn them over to him for delivery. At his busiest, he could spend up to 16 hours at the wheel. Any more business, and he’d have to hire another driver.

Like filling a Jello mold

“I have 11 molds that are kind of like play-dough that are basically cement,” he said. “You put your seals in and you form it. The next day you come back and strip it...open up the side and put it on the truck. You let it cure for a week or two. It’s like filling up a

Jello mold. When it comes out, it's literally the color green. The thing I love about this business is how simple it is."

Hitting, though, is a lot more complicated. Perry had his ideas, almost like a baseball scientist, going back to his early playing days. The goal is hitting a good fastball and working from there. He keeps his hands in instruction by working with kids later in the afternoon when his delivery route is completed. Perry has no plans as yet to, say, work for nearby colleges like Florida, for whom he played, and Florida State.

He has good memories of the teams for which he played – the Indians, Rays, Sox and Texas Rangers. Perry's career was held back by the hitters' backlog and injuries in Cleveland. He was blocked at third base by a young Jim Thome. There was no option to move to first on a talent-laden roster.

The Rays put him on waivers early in the 2000 season. He got his big break when Sox GM Ron Schueler signed him to plug a gaping hole at third. Almost immediately, while watching the famed Sox-Tigers brawl that spilled out into right field at The Cell, he knew he was headed for a place he liked.

After platooning briefly with Greg Norton, Perry took over the hot-corner job for the balance of 2000. He batted .308 with 29 doubles and 12 homers in 109 games. He was a complementary hitter for the likes of should-have-been MVP Frank Thomas and a trio of young, hard-hitting position players: Paul Konerko, Magglio Ordonez and Carlos Lee. Thomas' 143 RBIs were backed by Ordonez's 126, Konerko's 97 and 92 each from Lee and shortstop Jose Valentin.

The Sox really caught fire in mid-summer, led the old AL West by as many as 11 ½ games and lapped the circuit, winning easily while totaling 95 victories. Strangely, though, the fans did not storm the gates as you'd expect for only the second first-place Sox team since 1983. Attendance was just under 2 million, with



Magglio Ordonez (from left), Carlos Lee, Paul Konerko and Jose Valentin each drove in at least 92 runs to supplement Frank Thomas' 143 RBIs on the 2000 White Sox.

late-summer crowds in the high teens or low 20,000-range. Media questions about the laggard crowds were met by management responses such as suggesting a chunk of potential game attendees being out of town on the Labor Day weekend.

Late-season rotation instability and injuries had an effect on the playoff matchups against Lou Piniella, Alex Rodriguez and the Seattle Mariners. But it was the hitters who snoozed. Opening the American League Division Series with two games in Chicago, the lineup produced just seven runs in three games as Piniella out-matched Jerry Manuel in managerial strategy. Perry figured a lack of sense of urgency going into the postseason hurt the youngish Sox.

The future that wasn't for AL West champs

Still, the best days should have been ahead for the 2000 Sox.

“It was a young team with enough veteran (role models),” Perry said. “You had Frank on the offense and Cal Eldred on the pitching staff. The rest of them were young. That was Paul’s second year there. You go through that lineup. Ray Durham was just establishing himself. Everyone on that team was just trying to establish himself.”

Injuries prevented a repeat in 2001. Despite good production from the Konerko-Ordonez-Lee group, the collection of talent never repeated the 2000 accomplishments. Through 2005, the Sox did not win more than 86 games, only marginally contending against the archrival Minnesota Twins. Eventually, Lee and Ordonez departed prior to the more successful mix assembled for the ‘05 World Series winners.

With Joe Crede in the wings, Schueler successor Kenny Williams dealt Perry to Texas after the 2001 season. He enjoyed his peak run production season with 22 homers and 77 RBIs in 2002 in a lineup with Rodriguez and Rafael Palmeiro. But more injuries beset Perry. At 35, his career ended in 2004.

Regrets were muted. Perry always could return to his low-key home with a slower pace of life.

But, eventually, Herbert and Sheila Perry will go to town, so to speak. The couple has plans to move to Florida state capital Tallahassee in about three years.



The Herbert Perry family in a recent photo, knowing a real beach is never far away in north Florida. From left in back row are Gabrielle, Herbert, Sheila, Ethan and Drew Perry. In front is youngest daughter Olivia, adopted in 2009 from the Ukraine (Photo courtesy of Sheila Perry).

“She wants to live within 10 or 15 miles of a Starbucks,” Herbert mused. “She’s also a marathoner. Right now we’re just in a really good place.”

The Perry children will get off the farm, too. The oldest, college-alum Ethan, already has flown the coop and works in South Florida. Their teen-agers are Drew, a baseball player like Dad, and Gabrielle, who is brilliant academically. In addition to the Perrys’ own three kids, adopted daughter Olivia, now 12, will have a taste of the city. Olivia hails from the Ukraine. She was adopted at 5.

Baseball will always accompany parenting and business in Perry’s schedule. How much he coaches simply depends on his time. But he’s still got the yearning.

“I would still been my high school coach (if not for his business),” he said. “I had

so many good hitting coaches and played with so many good hitters that I figured out how to teach.

“I enjoy throwing batting practice. That’s the only kind of physical activity I can do. I can’t run. My knees (are shot). But I can throw batting practice all day long. I love working with kids in the cages. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday are my days in the cage. I work with boys 6-to-7. And girls 7 to whatever. My goal is for everyone to hit 100 balls, three days a week.”

The further into the 21st century Perry proceeds, the more of a throwback he becomes. To paraphrase Hawk Harrelson, don’t stop now, boy.