



## ***Sox's 'The Bandit' robbed foes of homers at old Comiskey***

*By Mark Liptak*

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Ken Berry's nickname was "The Bandit" because of his ability to rob opponents of sure home runs by vaulting himself onto or even over the center field fence in old Comiskey Park, and taking away blasts that seemed destined for the back of the bullpen.

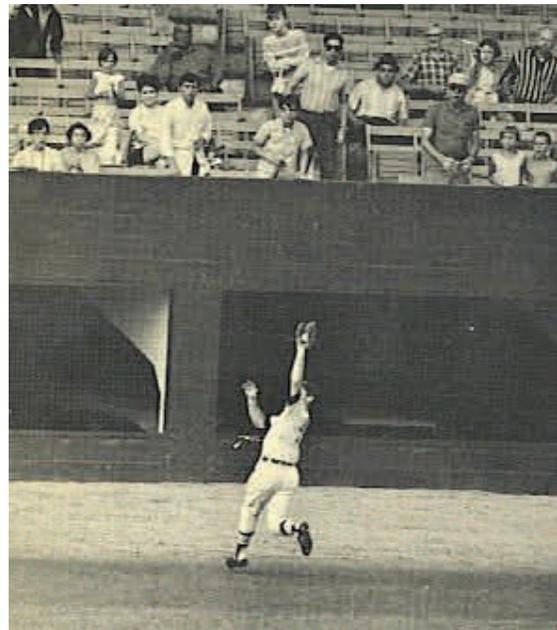
Later in life, Berry would become a noted minor-league manager, working with such promising youngsters as John Elway, Robin Ventura, Alex Fernandez and Frank Thomas. And if a major league career spanning 1962 through 1975 wasn't enough, along with an All-Star appearance and two Gold Gloves, Berry also worked in the movies, as fate pointed his way towards a technical advisor position in the Black Sox film *Eight Men Out*.

Throw in two of the greatest pennant races in White Sox history and you have quite a story to tell, which he did from his home in Kansas.

**Mark Liptak:** By the time you were in college at what is now Wichita State University, the White Sox were very interested in you. Tell us about how you were scouted. And wasn't Ted Lyons one of the Sox people who watched you?

**Ken Berry:** "Ted had come up from Louisiana to watch me play. It was really the only time that I was aware that someone was interested in me for baseball. I had a scholarship to play football in college, I was a wide receiver, but this was the first time for baseball."

**ML:** You signed with the Sox, and made your major league debut on Sept. 9, 1962 in Chicago against the Washington Senators. The Sox won 3-2 in 11 innings, you went one for three. What more do you remember from your first day on the field?"



**Ken Berry using the body English for which he's best remembered: chasing down a Sox opponent's long drive.**

**KB:** “I don’t remember much except that the first time I came up to bat I remember shaking badly. I didn’t play much the first few years. I was 20 years old at the time and it just didn’t hit me that I was playing in the major leagues.”

**ML:** 1964 was the year of the great chase as the Sox desperately tried to catch the Yankees and clinch the pennant. They would fall short by a single game and despite winning 98 games would be shut out of the World Series. Talk us through that final week.

**KB:** “I think I played every game down the stretch, which surprised me. Jim Landis had been there for years and he had been through the pressure. I hit very well in that stretch. Les Moss, my manager in Indianapolis, changed the position of my hands a little bit and I had a good year.

“I remember the Yankees closed out the season with the Indians who had talked about how they were ready to beat them. Instead New York won the first two games and won the pennant.”

**ML:** 1965 was your first full season with the Sox. That year you led the league in game appearances, games started, games finished, putouts and innings played but you only hit .217. Was it just that you were having a hard time adjusting to major league pitching?

**KB:** “No, I had hurt my neck playing football when I was 14. For some reason that injury flared up that spring. I couldn’t turn my head. I had to turn my body when trying to catch a fly ball. I finally found a Japanese gentleman who lived in Oak Park, and he used muscle interruption therapy to relax the muscles in my neck. The second half of the season I felt better and hit around .240. Also hurting me was the fact that I got an ulcer from the pressure being put on me by Ed Short, the Sox GM. Short kept threatening me, saying he was going to send me down to the minors if I didn’t start playing better. I was hurt, it’s not like I wanted to struggle.”

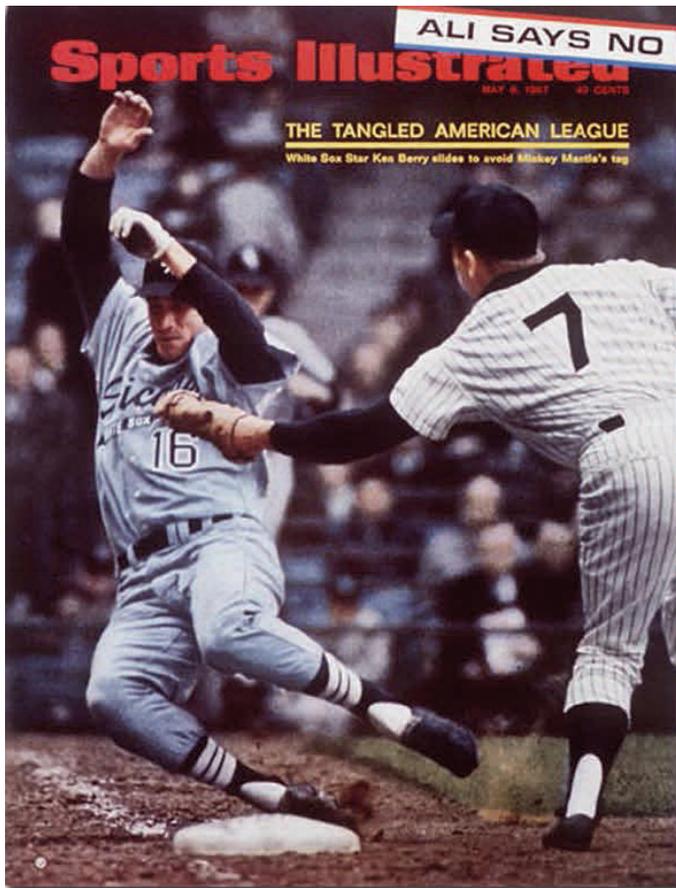
**ML:** You had known Sox manager Al Lopez for a number of seasons when you were at spring training, but this was the first time you got to see him on an everyday basis. What kind of man was he, what kind of manager was he?

**KB:** “Al was extremely professional. He and his coaching staff were very close. He played the percentages, and with the type of pitching staffs that we had, he’d play for one run. We did a lot of taking when the count was 3-1, for example. I’m not saying he was wrong, but that’s not the way I liked to play and that’s not what I did when I managed.”



**To play on the Sixties' Sox, Berry had to also excel at baserunning, as he shows here sliding around the Phillies' Pat Corrales.**

**ML:** The Sox had another fabulous season in 1965, finishing second with 95 wins. But some considered the season disappointing given that you guys started off by winning 22 of the first 30. Injuries played a part as both Gary Peters and Juan Pizarro went down but also Lopez missed time with a stomach ailment in June that season, didn't he? I imagine that uncertainty with Al didn't help matters.



**Sports Illustrated** already took note of the developing tight American League race with this cover depicting Ken Berry and the Yankees' Mickey Mantle just one month into the 1967 season.

spikes. We weren't that bad of hitters...it's just that it was very difficult to get ground balls through our infield. I remember one day I hit three curveballs hard one day off Gary Bell and every single one of them hit that area around home plate and died. That was frustrating. Bell made all three plays and he was laughing as I ran down the line."

**ML:** For a few reasons, including health, Lopez resigned as Sox manager in Nov. 1965. He was replaced by Eddie Stanky. I guess the best place to start is by asking your take on the differences between Al and Eddie.

**KB:** "This is an easy question. The differences were like night and day. Eddie was extremely aggressive as a manager. He always wanted us to put the pressure on the other

**KB:** "Actually Lopez being sick really wasn't that big of a distraction because guys like Tony Cuccinello and Don Gutteridge knew exactly what Al wanted to do. The continuity was still there. The injuries to Peters and Pizarro are what hurt us. When you lose two pitchers who were that good, that really hurt."

**ML:** The other big story that season involved so called "frozen" baseballs, a charge made that August by Tigers pitcher Hank Aguirre. Any truth to those accusations?

**KB:** "I didn't know anything about that aspect. What I did know is how they tailored Comiskey Park to our (pitchers) and that really hurt me and the other hitters."

"What the fans don't realize is that with the pitching staff we had, the park was tailored towards them. The infield grass was kept high, our pitchers were basically ground ball type guys, and the area around home plate was always a swamp. When you stepped in you could see the water seep up around your

team. He used the bunt a lot, the hit and run, the delayed steal... we had four or five guys who could run and we stole a lot of bases.”

“Eddie had a rule that you tag on every fly ball, at least make a bluff. He wanted to get the opposition to throw the ball around. He’d teach us things like how to try to knock the glove off the opponent when they were going to tag you. There’s a way to do it without being blatant about it and getting the umpire to call you out automatically.”

“He wanted to win and he expected you to have the same attitude. I didn’t have a problem with him because I knew that’s the way he was. I’d run through a wall for him, he taught me a lot and was very thorough about the game. He always said, you only get 27 outs in a game, so don’t waste them.”

**ML:** When Eddie would do things like his famous "strip tease" act in April 1966 or his comments about Carl Yastrzemski in June 1967, how much tougher did it make it for the Sox players to win games against guys that were upset by his actions? (Author’s Note: In April 1966 Stanky launched a verbal tirade at Detroit News sportswriter Watson Spoelstra, after he asked what kind of pitch Sox relief pitcher Bob Locker threw to Gates Brown in a key situation. In addition to yelling, Stanky ripped his uniform to shreds and threw his spikes against the clubhouse wall. In June 1967 Stanky was quoted as saying about Yaz, “He may be an All Star from the neck down, but in my book he’s a moody ballplayer...and I don’t like moody ballplayers.”)

**KB:** “It didn’t make a difference to me. A lot of the guys would laugh about it. Eddie just didn’t like Yaz for some reason. If he didn’t like you, he’d do anything he could to get into your head.”

**ML:** With all this as a backdrop the 1967 season started. The Sox were considered also ran’s, yet somehow you guys won. A 10 game winning streak that started on April 30 vaulted the team into first place, where you stayed through mid-August. Considering the talent on teams like the Red Sox, Tigers and Twins, how did the White Sox keep winning games?

**KB:** “We won because of pitching, speed and defense. Every team that you mentioned hit about .260 or better that year and when you look at the guys they had, they had a better lineup than us. We hit about .230 as a team but we made up for it by doing the little things to win games.”

**ML:** That year you were named to the All Star team for the game in Anaheim. What was that experience like for you?

**KB:** “It wasn’t a good one. I was hitting above .300 when the players voted for the team but by the time the game came around I was down to around .255 or so. I finished fourth in the player voting for outfielders, but Orioles manager Hank Bauer, who had the team that year, said he wasn’t going to pick me despite the player vote.”

“It turned out that right before the break we played the Orioles. Tom Phoebus threw me a pitch that I hit for a home run and as I was rounding the bases I yelled, ‘Take that, Bauer!’ In that same series Frank Robinson, who was going to be in the game, took out Al Weis trying to break up a double play. Robinson got hit in the head when he made

contact with Al and had double vision for a long time, so he was out of the game. Then Al Kaline popped up in a key situation and broke his hand when he punched the water cooler so he was out. When that happened Bauer said he'd take me.

“The game itself started in twilight and nobody at the plate could see anything. I don't think the fans wanted to see an All Star game where the pitchers just struck everyone out. (Author's Note: That game went 15 innings with the National League winning 2-1 on a home run by Tony Perez. Both pitching staffs combined for 30 strikeouts.) Finally in the last of the 15<sup>th</sup>, Bauer says to grab a bat. I go up there against Tom Seaver and he strikes me out on three pitches to end the game.”

**ML:** Going into the final week of the season, the Sox trailed Minnesota by a half game and closed the season with the A's and the Senators. Opponents like Mike Andrews of the Red Sox told me that he and his teammates saw who the Sox were going to play and said it was all over. The trouble was it was all over for the Sox, who dropped all five games and saw their chances blown away in a 1-0 loss to Washington on the last Friday of the year. It's been a long time but I know you have to remember that week.

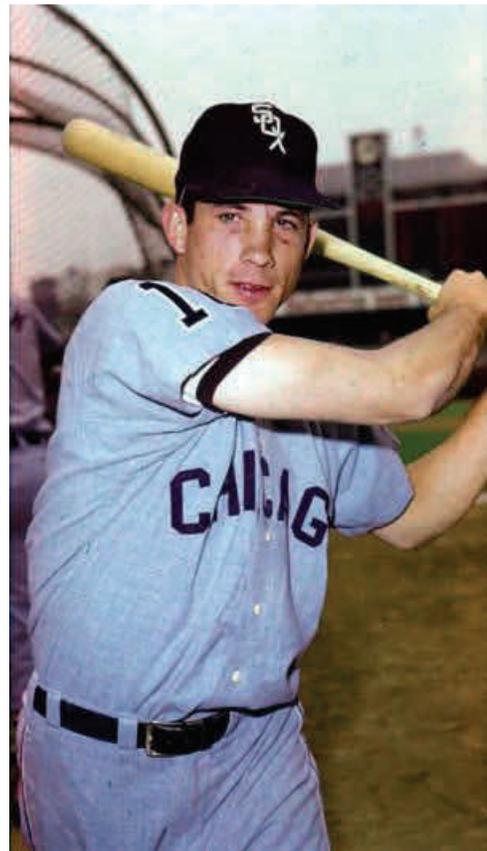
**KB:** “I think we went into that last week running out of gas. Stanky didn't substitute so we played every inning of every game, maybe we were just worn out. We also didn't play well defensively making three or four errors.

“The other thing I remember was that when we came home to face the Senators, we still had a chance to win the pennant, but in the stands there were only like 13,000 or 14,000 people. We should have had 40,000 or so to help cheer us on, it was just a downward spiral.” (Author's Note: The Friday night game on Sept. 29, 1967 drew 12,665.)

**ML:** The collapse came the following year and from 1968 through 1970 despite having talented guys like you, Ed Herrmann, Luis Aparicio, Joe Horlen, Peters and Tommy John, the Sox were awful. Why couldn't those teams win?

**KB:** “Look at the guys the Sox traded...Weis, Don Buford, Tommy Agee, Tommy McCraw, all the guys who could run. The Sox completely lost their aggressiveness. They played boring, lackluster baseball, just waiting to get beat.”

**ML:** You had some personal success though... in 1970 you hit .276 and won your first Gold Glove. Sox fans of that time remember you against the center field fence vaulting high on to it to grab what should have been home runs. Was that something you actually practiced?



Hitting was the one skill Ken Berry wishes he had been able to improve upon.

**KB:** “I worked on those leaping catches every single day. Every day I practiced stealing home runs. I’d throw my hat down to give me an idea of where I started from and I’d just start going after fly balls. After I’d make the catch I could see how far I went to get them and that gave me an idea of what I could do in a game.”

**ML:** One of the most bizarre plays you’d ever want to see took place on Sept. 18, 1971 and you were involved in it as a member of the Angels. It took place in Comiskey Park off the bat of Carlos May. I was sitting near Harry Caray in the center field bleachers when it happened. It took place in the first inning with the bases loaded. Tom Murphy was the pitcher. Will you take it from here?

**KB:** “I was playing left field and Mickey Rivers was in center that day. Carlos sliced a ball down the line and it was tailing away from me. I left my feet to try to make a diving catch but missed. I hit the turf really hard and got shook up a little. By the time Mickey got to the ball everyone scored. It wasn’t one of my prouder moments; in fact I’ve been trying to forget it! (laughing). That’s one of those lessons... if you are going to dive for the ball you sure better get a glove on it.”

**ML:** You also had the chance to manage in the minor leagues for a number of years. You had John Elway when you were with the Yankees, you managed for the Padres and also the White Sox in Birmingham. Can you list some of the kids you had the chance to work with who later went on to the South Side?

**KB:** “That was the year our Birmingham team was like a runaway train, we just beat everyone in the league. We won 14 in a row at one point. I had guys like Robin Ventura, Matt Merullo, Frank Thomas and Craig Grebeck.

“Our style was to be aggressive, that’s what I learned from Stanky. We did a lot of things like hit and run, steal bases, move guys along.”

**ML:** I’d like to zero in on Frank Thomas. He had an uncanny ability to be able to hit the ball hard, hit it far, but also he had an incredible ability to draw walks and know the strike zone. You played against Hall Of Famers like Al Kaline, Tony Oliva, Harmon Killebrew and Yastrzemski. As a hitter how does Frank compare with those greats?

**KB:** “Don’t forget he was such a big man that he had a big strike zone. He hit with a little bit of a crouch. The last thing I told him when he was called up was ‘Don’t stop hitting the ball to center field.’ With him he had such power, that he could do that and the ball would still go 450 - 500 feet. Also doing that let you see the ball just a little longer to tell the type of pitch it was.”

**ML:** You also got the opportunity to be the technical advisor on *Eight Men Out*, directed by John Sayles. How did you get that chance?

**KB:** “I was managing in Appleton (Wisc.) for the Royals. The Twins farm club was being managed by a friend of mine, Don Leppert. After the season Leppert calls me and asks what I’m doing in the off-season. He asked if I’d like to help on a movie. So he gave me the number of the person to call, I did and got to be technical advisor on *Eight Men Out*. It took about two months and I had a great time.”

**ML:** Some of the actors involved, especially Charlie Sheen, had been around the game all their life and had played it competitively. I'd imagine you could tell fairly quickly who could play and who couldn't. Was there anybody else besides Sheen who impressed you that way? (Author's Note: Sheen, while attending Yale University, was the last cut from the team his freshman year. He was a pitcher and later used that experience playing Rick Vaughn in the movie *Major League*).

**KB:** "D.B. Sweeney knew what he was doing. John Cusack was pretty athletic. It's just that era-wise, he wasn't quite right. He was trying to do a lot of things that just didn't happen on a ball field in the (early 20th century). He did make some athletic stops at third base in the movie, he'd just dive fully extended and make the catch. I was hitting those balls to him off camera with a fungo bat and I was hitting them good.

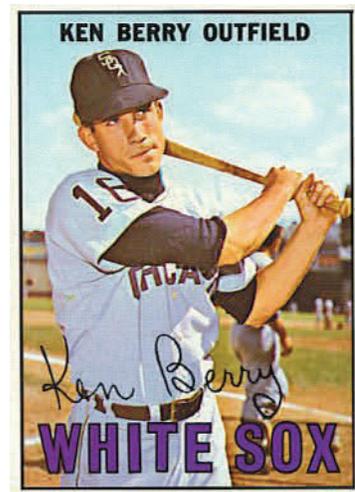
"I remember one scene where Sheen had to make a catch and hit the unpadded portion of the park we were shooting in. (Author's Note: The game scenes were filmed in Indianapolis, where the White Sox had their top farm team for many years.) I showed Charlie how to make the catch and then spin into the wall so that he really wasn't hitting it that hard. So we did the shot and Charlie unfortunately forgot about spinning and just slammed right into it. He tore up his leg pretty good when he caught it on a piece that was sticking out from the door. One other thing about Charlie stands out. I was throwing the ball and he had to dive and make the catch. On one play he did it fully extended directly over his head. Just remarkable."

**ML:** You also got the chance for a small on-camera speaking part in the film. What's the story behind that? (Author's Note: Towards the end of the movie, as "Shoeless" Joe Jackson is playing under an assumed name in a minor league game, a fan heckles him. After Jackson belts a triple, while standing on third base he gives it right back to the "fan." That "fan" was Berry.)

**KB:** "I was actually supposed to play the part of the thug that threatens to kill 'Lefty' Williams' wife if he doesn't throw the last game. So I practiced the role and had it down right when the girl in charge of casting said that she wanted to make a change.

"So I started working on the new part and felt I had it OK. One day John Sayles comes up to me and says, 'Are you ready?' He also said that because it was late in the day and the sun was going down it had to be done in one take. You talk about pressure! I had called up a friend of mine, Dick Kenworthy, who lived in the area and asked him 'You want to be in a movie?' He was sitting right next to me in the scene. (Author's Note: Kenworthy played for the Sox in 1962 and from 1964 to 1968.) So we did it and I was so proud that I was actually able to do it in one take."

**ML:** Can you wrap up that entire experience from your days in Chicago?



**Ken Berry's baseball cards was one of them mainstays for the Sox from 1965 to 1970.**

**KB:** “I had some great years and great memories in Chicago. I was so fortunate to play under the Sox managers that I did because they all gave me something that I could use later when I became a manager myself. Al Lopez was part of the ‘old guard’ and I learned working the percentages from him, Eddie Stanky taught me a lot about the game and the aggressive style that I think wins in baseball. Chuck Tanner, who was only my manager for about a month, taught me how to be a ‘players manager.’ He and Roland Hemond were exactly the type of people the Sox needed at the right time. The fans were good to me.”