



## ***La Russa 1979 promotion to Sox manager a surprise to future Hall of Famer***

*By Mark Liptak*

*Posted Monday, February 17th, 2014*

*(First of a two-part series)*

Tony LaRussa is going into the Hall of Fame in July as one of the greatest managers in baseball history.

In 33 years he won 2,728 games. He won three World Series titles with Oakland and St. Louis. He won six pennants. He made 14 post-season appearances and managed in six All-Star games. He made his reputation leading the A's and Cardinals. But before the reputation, before the wins and the World Series titles, Tony started his career in Chicago as manager of the White Sox from Aug. 1979, succeeding Don Kessinger, through June 1986 when he was fired by then-GM Hawk Harrelson.

La Russa, now an assistant in the Commissioner's office, was very generous with his time via a 2 1/2-hour phone interview from his home in Oakland shortly after Christmas. It was a fascinating look inside one of the smartest men to ever manage in baseball and one of only five to have had a law degree. All of those law alums will be in the Hall of Fame when La Russa is inducted. He was thoughtful, direct, funny and humble, remembering his days with the White Sox with great fondness.

Of course, La Russa always will have South Side-North Side connection. He's a popular trivia subject, having played his only game with the Cubs as a ninth-inning pinch-runner for fellow Cooperstown enshrine Ron Santo, scoring the winning run against the Montreal Expos on Opening Day, April 6, 1973 before 40,273 at Wrigley Field.



**Tony La Russa as most Sox fans first knew him, a young manager wearing the unusual throwback Bill Veeck-era uniform.**

**Mark Liptak:** What is your baseball history before you came to the Sox as manager?

**Tony LaRussa:** “I played 16 years in baseball, mostly in the minor leagues and I was hurt for five of the first six of them. I had serious injuries five times and played with a bad arm for most of that time. I was with the White Sox organization as a player/coach in 1975 and 1976; I did both at Denver and at Iowa before I finished my playing career in New Orleans in 1977 again as a player/coach. I really hadn’t thought a lot about managing or making baseball a career, I started law school while I was playing and I probably played the last five years just to be able to pay for my legal education. When I was at Denver, Loren Babe was the manager and through him I really started to take an interest in coaching, Loren opened me up to what managing was really all about.

“In 1977, after graduating from law school, I played for the Cardinals organization in New Orleans. One of my professors thought New Orleans might provide an opportunity to get work as a clerk for a circuit court judge, but I decided I wanted to see if I could continue my career in baseball. I wrote letters to teams and the White Sox answered and actually offered me the job of managing the Knoxville (Tenn.) team in Double A for 1978. (Author’s Note: According to the 1984 White Sox media guide, Tony was offered the job primarily on the recommendation of Babe.) We did well and won the first half of the Southern League. I was promoted to be the first-base coach of the Sox for the rest of that year. The next year I was named to manage the Triple A team in Iowa before I was offered the Sox managerial position.”

**ML:** What do you remember about the day you were named manager?



**A teen-age Tony La Russa (left) and Sox manager Al Lopez, both products of Tampa’s impressive baseball pipeline, meet at old Municipal Stadium in Kansas City in 1962.**

**TLR:** “It was bizarre the way everything happened to me. I think I was promoted to first-base coach because the Sox wanted some youthful enthusiasm on the staff and then I coached in the Dominican Republic that off-season before going to Iowa. My wife and I were eating at a Chinese restaurant in Des Moines that day when Walt Jocketty, who was working for the Sox, found me. He said that Roland Hemond had called and that I needed to get back to him immediately. I called Roland and he said that Don Kessinger had decided to retire and offered me the job. I said ‘Where?’ and he said to manage the White Sox...I was stunned and so was my wife when I told her.

“We must have sat in that restaurant for at least an hour talking about it. Elaine, my wife, was about a month away from our first child and we were comfortable in Des Moines, we liked the area and made

friends. But the more we talked, the more we understood that an opportunity like this comes along once in a lifetime. If I said no, there were no guarantees something like this would happen again. So I called Roland, who had given me until 4 p.m. and said yes...we flew to Chicago and it was announced the next day. Then I met the team in Toronto.”

**ML:** What are some of the best memories of the people you worked with? Let’s start with Bill Veeck.

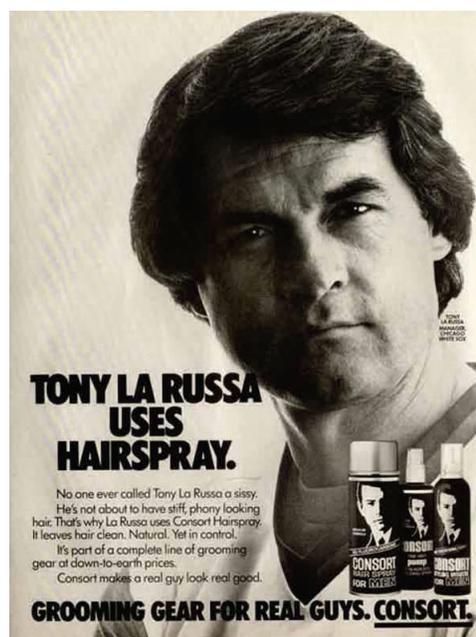
**TLR:** “I think the fact that I was going to law school intrigued him. When I was coaching, he often invited me to dinner. I’d be there with him and Paul Richards, Ken Silvestri and Roland Hemond. At those dinners he’d challenge you, he wanted to see if you’d speak your mind when he asked you about something. I remember one time we were talking about using the hit-and-run and playing the infield in halfway. Al Lopez, a great Sox manager, didn’t like the hit-and-run and Paul Richards, another great Sox manager, didn’t like to bring his infield in halfway. I did, and had to defend my reasoning behind doing something like that.

“Looking back, I was being tested by him. I also was invited to join him in the Bards Room sometimes after games. You talk about going to grad school for baseball... that was special. When I went to those, you didn’t talk, you listened and maybe took some notes. I know when he offered me the job to manage the team again in 1980 he made me promise that I’d finish the final part of the Florida law school exam, which I did. That was important to him. I love Bill and Mary Frances Veeck, who became close with my wife.”

**ML:** In Jan. 1981 Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn got the club and things immediately began to happen. I know you are still close to both men. What were they like to work with?

**TLR:** “When they took over it, wasn’t guaranteed that I’d stay as the manager. I know that both Bill and Roland went to bat for me and (Reinsdorf and Einhorn) got control of the club so late. It was only a month to go before spring training started that it wouldn’t have made sense for them to try to find someone else at that point in time. I came to Chicago to meet them, explained my thoughts and they offered me the job. They showed confidence in me and support through good times and bad and that’s something I’ll never forget.

“One of the first things they did when they took over was challenge Roland, they were into winning and they wanted to know how things could change with the team. With



**Tony La Russa’s fashionably long hair and good looks landed him some endorsements as Sox manager, like this 1985 hairspray ad.**

that, Roland told them to sign Carlton Fisk. That would send the message, and that's what happened. They also got Greg Luzinski."

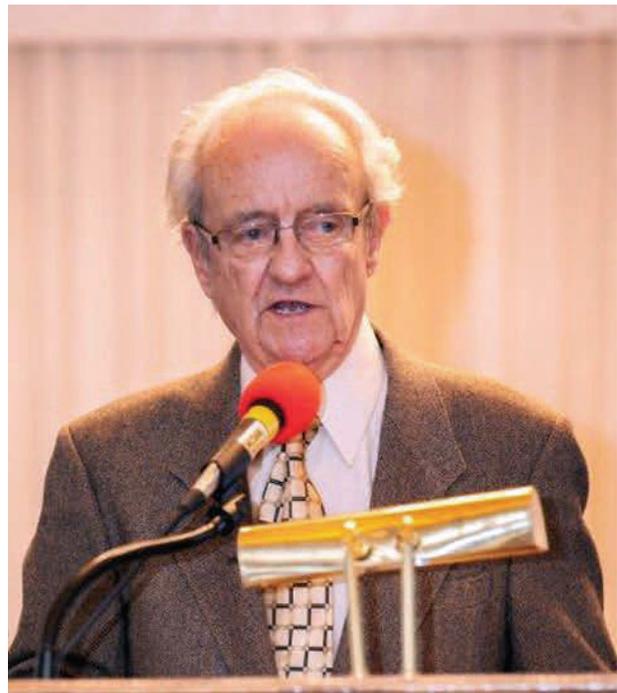
"Eddie was the idea guy, he was into promotions, marketing, and television...remember this is the guy who basically got college basketball on TV. (Author's Note: Einhorn also was a member for many years of baseball's television committee and was the driving force behind getting the World Football League on the Hughes Television Network) Jerry was more like the CEO and that's the approach he took. They made a very good team.

"Jerry was very, very interested in the game, he was genuinely curious about it; he was a fan since he was a boy. He wanted to know why this hit and run didn't work or what was the thought process behind putting this player in. We had a lot of great conversations. He also was very progressive in a lot of areas. For example, for a long time coaches were just friends of the manager or guys getting their time in to get a pension. But Jerry recognized that because kids were being pushed to the majors earlier, the role of coaches as teachers became crucial. He embraced the idea of putting together the best coaching staff you possibly could, that the staff of a manager should be a force for developing players.

"With that, I thought we had the best staff in baseball, Dave Duncan was our pitching coach and he was the best in the game. Charlie Lau was the best hitting coach in the game until he passed away. Ed Brinkman was a superb infield coach and Davey Nelson was a tremendous baserunning coach. We had Jimmy Leyland as the third-base coach and everyone has seen what he did in his career. Art Kusnyer, 'Caveman,' was the bullpen coach. Jerry has a great heart; he's always giving and caring."

**ML:** Your relationship also remains close with Hemond. In his interview with me, he always had the utmost respect and admiration for you and your ability.

**TLR:** "I have never been around a person like Roland in my baseball career. He touched my life in so many ways. To be around a guy so positive and so respected, I truly believe that Roland is the most beloved man in this generation of baseball. I can give you a few examples of what he did for me. One was at the winter meetings of 1979 when he took me around to introduce me to people and another was in spring training 1980. Roland told me that he had some things he needed to get done and wouldn't be down to Sarasota until about 10 days after we started. Now if I really needed him, I could have called my



**Roland Hemond was a mentor to Tony La Russa when he was Sox manager.**

'lifeline' and he would have come down. But later I realized that he was showing confidence in me, he was allowing me to take charge...remember this was my first spring training as manager.

“Remember, Roland also was able to balance his kindness with the fact that he had responsibilities as a GM. He was tough and never hesitated to make the tough call. That’s why he was an outstanding GM.”

**ML:** With the new ownership team in place, money started being spent and you got some quality players to work with immediately as Fisk and Luzinski signed on. It seemed like a different atmosphere with the club...can a few good players make that much of a difference?

**TLR:** “Gene Mauch told me that one of the most important keys to a successful team is the type of people your greatest stars are. Are they in it for the right reasons? Are they selfish? Both Carlton and Greg were great teammates, they were leaders in drills and on and off the field. They had terrific work ethics. Showing the proper way to do drills in spring training is very important. They didn’t go through the motions, they did them correctly and that rubbed off on everyone else. You can’t overestimate how the culture changed, how our work ethic improved when those two men joined the team.”



**Tony La Russa meets Nationals GM Mike Rizzo (left) and Pete Caliendo (right), now the incoming president of the Pitch and Hit Club, at the latter organization’s 2013 annual banquet.**

**ML:** At 34, you were very young to be a manager, not much older than some players and you were tested. Chet Lemon had his differences with you for a time (much to his regret as he told me in his interview) and Ron LeFlore just seemed to be a handful. How did you get your point across that you were in charge given the unusual nature of your age and the relationship to the players?

**TLR:** “It was a unique situation. I got every break in the book to be able to manage after only doing it about a year and a half in the minor leagues. That being said, I never cheated the game. I played hard for 16 years, never gave away an at-bat and I took notes. I was told a simple formula, ‘Love the game and want to learn it.’ That’s what I did.

“By my nature I’m really not a ‘ballsy’ guy, I don’t like to fight, I’d rather walk away, but if somebody gives you responsibility, your courage expands. I can say in all honesty

that I was never afraid of any player, I never lied to them, I was never afraid to teach them and I was never afraid to care for them. When you take over as manager that first day, the respect and trust level starts at zero. You have to earn it. You have to tell the truth, we're all in this together. I took a one-on-one personalized approach and felt that hard work would lead to success. You can't be afraid to lead. Paul Richards told me something one time that I never forgot when I managed: "Trust your gut, don't cover your ass."

**ML:** At times your relationship with Sox fans was a little rocky to say the least; there were some tough times as you were laying the foundation for the 1983 success. In general what did you think of Sox fans during your tenure?

**TLR:** "I counted them as a blessing because they cared deeply about the team. They were and are very passionate. When I took over, they had no reason to have confidence in me. Like with the players, I had to earn their respect and trust. I always thought it starts with the effort being shown by the players and the staff. Sox fans, all fans, have the right to expect their team to be able to compete, to be able to win and to play in October. Yes, at times it was difficult. In 1982, I managed a series at home against Boston wearing a bulletproof vest under my jacket. There was a death threat. I thought it was a joke at first, but was told that it was being taken seriously."

*(In the upcoming second and final part of this series, La Russa talks about the remainder of his 1980s tenure as Sox manager, his career beyond his firing and reports he might have come back to the South Side in the mid-1990s. In addition, a 1996 audio interview with La Russa after he had been named Cardinals manager will be aired on the "Diamond Gems Flashback" on the "Vintage Radio Interviews" section of the Chicago Baseball Museum web site).*