

'72 Rewind: White Sox Comeback Was Tale of Two Trades, One MVP Season

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Posted on Monday, April 2, 2012

As November of 1971 drew to a close, there was a blizzard of activity in Arizona Biltmore Hotel, where the annual Winter Meetings were in session. Few if any baseball executives welcomed the buzz more than White Sox personnel director Roland Hemond, and he had arrived at Phoenix with the wish list to prove it.



One year earlier, Hemond was hired to resurrect a team that had one foot in the cellar and the other in Washington, D.C., where it was rumored to be headed before long. The White Sox came off the worst season in franchise history, one in which they ranked dead last in victories and home attendance in the major leagues. The combination wasn't without at least one positive. They couldn't possibly get worse, could they?

In Hemond's debut, with third baseman Bill Melton, pitcher Wilbur Wood and manager Chuck Tanner in lead roles, the White Sox showed a hefty 23-game improvement. Nonetheless, while barely 10,000 customers showed up at White Sox Park on a given day, whispers about a franchise relocation remained audible in the background.

While encouraged by the early progress, Hemond knew the next step would be more difficult. The team lacked depth, not to mention star power. Specifically, there was an urgent need for an established run-producer who would allow Melton to have more and better opportunities in the clean-up spot. In the final weeks of the previous season, in which Melton hit 33 home runs to become the first home run champion in franchise history, opponents began to pitch around him more frequently.

"I believed the franchise was headed in the right direction at the time," Hemond told the Chicago Baseball Museum. "But when you consider how far back we started, we still had a long way to go to become a competitive ballclub let alone a contender. There was a lot of work to be done."

In the desert, Hemond had come to the right place. General Managers were unusually ambitious at the time, and in a span of five days, no less than 53 major league players would change uniforms. Still, Hemond could never have dreamed that two telephone calls only minutes apart would change the fortunes of a franchise so drastically, perhaps even save it.

The first voice was that of Al Campanis, the Los Angeles Dodgers general manager. He was in search of an established pitcher to fill out the rotation. When the name of Richie Allen was mentioned – or Dick as he preferred to be called – Hemond's ears perked up considerably. Not only did the veteran total 23 home runs and 90 RBI the previous season, but he did much

of the damage at Dodger Stadium, which like White Sox Park was one of the most pitcher-friendly ballparks in the big leagues. At 29, he was in his prime.

If only a blockbuster trade was that easy. As Hemond didn't have to be reminded, controversy followed Allen wherever he had been in his star-crossed career. His many critics considered him to be a slacker or worse. Allen maintained that the reputation was a media creation and grossly unfair, but his late arrivals and occasional no-shows at the ballpark did little to change minds. The Dodgers were his third team in eight years, and he had a hand in the dismissals of two previous managers.

What's more, Allen was paid a reported \$95,000 the previous season, which put him in line to become the highest-paid player in White Sox history. Could the organization afford him? And if so, how would he be accepted in the clubhouse?

Immediately Hemond sought out the opinion of his own manager. Allen didn't have many fans among those in authority positions, but in Tanner, he had no bigger one.

“Get him!” Tanner said.

The ringing endorsement was based on personal experience, not hope or hearsay. Tanner hailed from New Castle, Pa., 10 miles south of Wampum, where Allen was born. Tanner knew the Allen family. He watched little Richie grow up. He played with and against his older brothers. Trusted third base coach Joe Lonnett went to bat for Allen as well. Lonnett resided in the same area and officiated his youth basketball games back in the day.

Tanner's own reputation played no small role in the decision. In his one full season as a major league manager, his most obvious asset was the ability to get the most out of his players regardless of their talent levels.

“Chuck had a lot of respect for Dick as a person and a player,” Hemond recalled. “When he conveyed that message, it was good enough for me. I knew that, if anybody could get the most out of Dick, he would be the one.”

Moments later, Hemond called Campanis to confirm his interest. The Dodgers already had three solid starters in Don Sutton, Claude Osteen and Al Downing, but there was concern about the health of Bill Singer as the fourth member of the rotation.

What would it take to make the deal? Pitchers Tommy John and Terry Forster, Campanis answered. In Forster, a 19-year-old with a golden left arm, he had visions of another Sandy Koufax, the Dodgers great who had retired five years earlier.

Trouble was, Hemond thought much the same thing.

“You may get John,” he replied, “but you won't get Forster.”

Because the demand for Allen wasn't great at the time, Hemond wielded some leverage here. Finally, after a few more names were bandied about, the two sides settled on John and Steve Huntz, a journeyman infielder.

Next Hemond had to sell team owner John Allyn on the idea, no small feat in itself. Allyn had fallen on hard times financially, partly the result of a failed attempt by him and his brother Arthur to bring professional soccer to Chicago four years earlier. His baseball team had one of the lowest payrolls in the major leagues.

“I told John that Dick would make us a much better team,” Hemond said. “I stressed that his salary would be worth it because of all the fans that he brought to the ballpark. No team would have a better combination than Dick and Bill in the three-four spots, and that would create a lot of excitement among our fans. I must have done a good job to sell it, because Arthur liked the idea after awhile.”

Certainly, Allyn would like the bold move better than general manager Stu Holcomb, a former college football coach and Northwestern University athletic director who was in charge of the business side. Because Holcomb was chained to the bottom line, Hemond made sure that he would be the last person in the front office to know about it.

“While Chuck and I discussed strategy in the hotel lobby one day, we saw Stu at the top of the escalator,” Hemond said. “We were afraid that he might get wind of it. So I told Chuck to hurry up there and keep him occupied for awhile.”

The Dodgers stipulated that, before any such deal was consummated, they would have to replace Allen in the middle of the batting order. When the Baltimore Orioles agreed to trade veteran outfielder Frank Robinson in return for four prospects, the final piece was in place.

A Call to Arms Is Answered

Barely 15 minutes later, Hemond received another phone call. This time it was Lee MacPhail, the New York Yankees general manager. His team was in search of a third baseman, and MacPhail wanted to know if Rich McKinney could handle the position on a regular basis. McKinney made an impression on the Yankees the previous season, when he hit .379 against them. He was drafted as a shortstop but had experience at three infield spots.

“I said that third base was Rich's best position, but because we had an All-Star in Bill Melton already, there was no place for him there,” Hemond said.

The Yankees had five starting pitchers for four spots, and veteran Stan Bahnsen was the odd man out. When they agreed to part with the right-hander in return for McKinney straight up, the White Sox had a replacement for John in the rotation.

Unlike John, 28, many observers were surprised that the Yankees didn't hold out for more in a trade that drew the ire of their fans back home. In four seasons with fairly average teams, Bahnsen averaged 13-plus victories and 34 starts. Boston Red Sox outfielder Carl Yastrzemski once remarked that no pitcher threw harder in the league.

He would turn 27 in two weeks.

On Dec. 2, when the double-barreled moves became official, it wasn't clear whether Allen would play left field or first base, which was his best position. All that mattered was that Melton had a tag-team partner and the team had another gate attraction.

“We've got a bomber!” gushed Tanner, even more excited than usual.

John and Bahnsen were receptive to the change of venues. After three consecutive sub-.500 seasons, John had become frustrated about the lack of defense behind him. The sinkerballer also was less than thrilled about the installation of AstroTurf in the infield at White Sox Park two years earlier, a decision that “made it tough on our pitchers,” as he put it.

Bahnsen welcomed the chance to play for Tanner and Johnny Sain, who was widely regarded to be one of the premier pitching coaches in the major leagues.

“I didn't know Sain when he was with the Yankees, but I've heard a lot about him,” Bahnsen was quoted at the time. “All the pitchers I've talked to tell me he's helped them. I know Tom Bradley looked a lot better last year when he was with Chicago. He looked like twice the pitcher he'd been the year before.”

The arrivals of Bahnsen and especially Allen paid dividends before a pitch could be thrown. Throughout their history, White Sox teams had been built to the dimensions of their spacious ballpark, which placed a premium on speed, defense and pitching. Suddenly, fans had a rare vision of not one but two legitimate thumpers in the middle of the batting order. Immediately there was talk that Allen and Melton could become the most lethal one-two combination in team history, and the buzz translated into a noticeable spike in ticket sales. By mid-January, WFLD-TV already had sold full sponsorship in pregame shows and 60 percent of its air time for regular-season games, a 36 percent increase from the previous year.

Now Allen had to sell himself to his teammates, namely those who had been asked to accept token pay raises. That is, if they received bumps at all. When Allen came to terms on a \$125,000 deal in late March, his salary represented close to one-fourth of the team payroll. By that time, Holcomb had begun to cut corners elsewhere.

“I look back at the trade with mixed emotions,” conceded outfielder Rick Reichardt, who reluctantly accepted a \$2,000 pay increase. “It's hard to argue about what Dick did on the field, but some of us had to make sacrifices to get him there. Remember, there were no million-dollar contracts at the time. A lot of us worked in the off-season to make ends meet.”

A players' strike pushed the start of the regular season back 10 days, and the White Sox players were front and center in the walkout even if they hadn't planned it that way. The players union sought a 17 percent increase in fixed retirement benefits as well as a boost in medical and health care premiums. In what was expected to be a routine visit to their training camp in Sarasota, Fla., union chief Marvin Miller informed the players that the team owners had made what he considered to be a low-ball offer and refused to negotiate in good faith. White Sox players voted unanimously to authorize a strike if necessary, a result that player representative Joe Horlen announced somewhat reluctantly. The veteran pitcher was released less than four weeks later.

A Season to Remember

On April 15, when the White Sox opened the regular season in Kansas City, Allen wasted no time to make a good first impression on fans and teammates. In the ninth inning, he blasted a two-out home run off Royals starter Dick Drago to break a scoreless tie, only to have his team lose in the 13th inning.

Back home, it didn't take long for the locals to warm up to the new-look team and for the players to feed off them. The homies played inspired ball at White Sox Park throughout the season, as their 55 victories were the most in franchise history. The highlight was a memorable four-game series against the New York Yankees in early June, which attracted nearly 115,000 customers in three days. In the final game, Allen clubbed a pinch-hit, three-run homer off reliever Sparky Lyle in the ninth inning. First, Allen had to be called out of the clubhouse. Convinced that his services would not be required in the second game of the doubleheader, he famously ate tacos to pass the time away.

By then, teammates had become accustomed to the rather unorthodox ways of their meal ticket. Certainly, it was difficult to argue with the bottom line. In one of the most dominant performances by a White Sox player ever, Allen paced the league in home runs (team-record 37), bases on balls (99), extra-base hits (70), RBI (113), on-base percentage (.603) and slugging percentage (.420). His 27 homers at home also were the most in one season in franchise history.

“The best player that I ever played with in my career,” Bahnsen called him. “Dick went about his business in a different way, but he was a good teammate and could flat-out play.”

Bahnsen made no small contribution himself even if it came with less fanfare. The staff lacked experience, not to mention Bart Johnson, who sustained an off-season knee injury that would require surgery eventually. The shorthanded situation prompted Sain and Tanner to decide on a three-man rotation of Wood, Bahnsen and Bradley, who combined for 130 starts and 60 victories. Sain worked with Bahnsen to refine his breaking ball, and the improved second pitch was crucial to his success. He totaled 21 wins in 42 starts, nine of which came on two days of rest.

Said Bahnsen, “There were a lot of days when I shouldn't have been out there. We didn't have a proven fourth starter and team ownership didn't have the money to add one, so we had to make due with what we had at the time. It wasn't the ideal situation, but we made it work for the most part.”

The Oakland Athletics entered the season as the unanimous choice to capture the West Division title. On paper, from top to bottom, the White Sox were no match for them. But with Allen in the midst of a monstrous career season and Tanner at his motivational best, the South Siders gave the eventual World Series champions all they could handle for five months. They were in first place as late as Aug. 28 and for 14 days in all.

As much as this team overachieved for much of the season, its flaws were exposed eventually. The turning point came in late June, when Melton went down for the remainder of the season

because of a ruptured disc in his back. Without protection behind him, Allen was pitched to more carefully, a turn of events that diminished his Triple Crown chances and the division hopes of his team. When the Athletics acquired battle-tested veterans Matty Alou and Dal Maxvill before the trade deadline, the talent gap became even greater. They finished with an 87-68 record, 5 1/2 games behind the leaders.

“When we lost Bill midway through the season, it was a big blow for the team,” Bahnsen said. “Dick carried us as far as he could and needed some help at that point. We hoped the front office would make a move before the trade deadline, but it didn't have the money to get it done. The guys understood the situation, but we were deflated a little bit. One more player might have put us over the top.”

Faces brightened considerably after the season, when the organization dominated the individual honors. Allen was selected Most Valuable Player by a considerable margin, although there was a hint of media backlash when he failed to receive three of the 24 first-place votes. Wood finished a close second in the Cy Young Award vote, and if the 24-game winner hadn't dropped his final five decisions, he probably would have won it. Tanner was the recipient of the Manager of the Year Award. And Hemond garnered Executive of the Year honors.

Chicago fans were the biggest winners of all. Home attendance swelled to 1.18 million, the third-highest total in the league. It marked the first time that the team reached seven figures in seven years.

“We were disappointed not to play in the postseason, which was our goal,” Hemond said. “But when you look at the big picture, we did something even more important. We put the franchise on solid ground again. It was a great time for all of us, and anyone who was there won't forget it. I can't tell you how many people have told me that they became White Sox fans that season, and they still are to this day.”

The team that had taken flight in Phoenix only months earlier was here to stay, after all.