



## '59 Sox star Landis slowed in body, but not in spirit

*By Mark Liptak, CBM Contributor  
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These were two “off-years” Jim Landis scarcely imagined he’d ever have.

Fifty-five years ago, as the White Sox used pitching and defense to snare a long-expected pennant in 1959, Landis effortlessly ran down fly balls in center field. But lately he has been confined to a wheelchair after complications from a hip operation in California and is struggling to regain the use of his legs.

His attitude and desire haven’t diminished, however. Landis is taking the same approach to walking again that he did playing for the Sox from 1957 through 1964, namely giving it everything he’s got.



**Jim Landis in Nov. 2011, at center in dark shirt, surrounded by players from the Napa Valley Baseball Club. Photo credit [www.napavalleyregister.com](http://www.napavalleyregister.com).**

It’s a shame that TV footage of those days scarcely exists anymore. Sox fans would be able to see how good a player Landis was. Hall of Fame Yankees announcer Mel Allen said Landis was as good a defensive outfielder as Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays. And in an era when most center fielders other than Mantle and Mays really couldn’t hit much, Landis averaged 82 runs scored, 64 RBIs and 20 stolen bases between 1958 and 1962.

When Landis retired after the 1967 season, his fielding percentage was the second best all-time in baseball. He was a four-time Gold Glove winner. His 1,035 games played in the outfield rank him in the top three all-time in Sox history. Landis hit .292 in the 1959 World Series. He made the All-Star team in 1962 playing in the game in Washington, D.C. and was voted to the Sox All-Century Team at one of the outfield positions.

Today Landis and his wife are retired and live in the Napa Valley region northeast of San Francisco. He recently spoke with me from the nursing home where he is staying until he is able to recover the use of his legs.

**Mark Liptak:** Do you recall how you were scouted and signed by the Sox?

**Jim Landis:** "I came from California and had started at a junior college when a Sox scout, Bobby Mattox, contacted me. He actually saw me in high school. I wanted to play major-league baseball, so I said, 'Let's do it,' and signed for \$2,500 and was sent to Class D, Wisconsin Rapids in 1952. That was a pretty good league, comparable to Class A today."

**ML:** You started out that first year as a third baseman. Why the switch to the outfield?

**JL:** "I always ran very well and had a good arm. I guess they wanted to use that talent. In 1953, I was sent to Colorado Springs, where two guys really worked with me. Don Gutteridge and Johnny Mostil, (who) just busted my rear for two to three hours a day. I owe them a lot because they showed me everything from how to position myself, to cutting down angles, the works. Paul Richards was there and at times he had to tell them, 'He's had enough,' they were pushing me so hard."

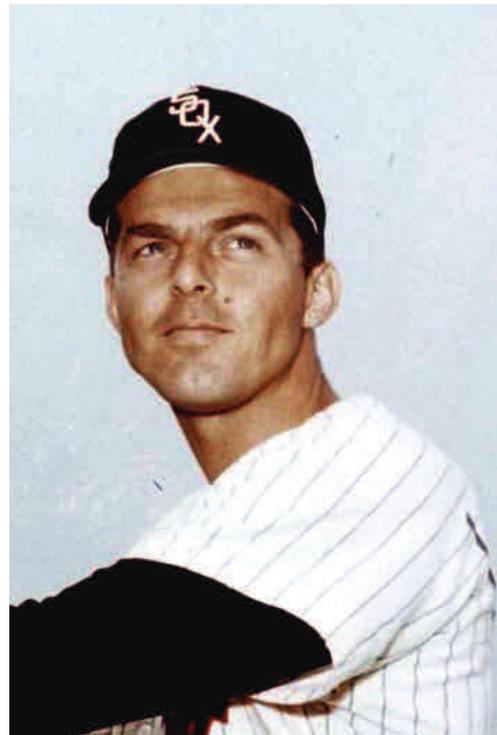
**ML:** You finally came up to the White Sox after two years of military service in 1957; do you remember anything about your first game?

**JL:** "I was nervous... didn't know where I was at! To top it off, I had to face one of the hardest-throwing guys in baseball at that time, Herb Score. I think I had two pop outs and a strikeout or two strikeouts and a pop out. Either way, I remember saying, 'What am I doing here?' It took a little while but finally I said to myself, 'You belong' and that's when I started to play better."

**ML:** By 1959 you were an established starter and the Sox, of course, would win the pennant. In spring training did you and the guys feel that 1959 was going to be your year?

**JL:** "We felt that we had a good shot. We weren't overconfident but we knew that we had good pitching and very good defense. We were strong up the middle with (Nellie) Fox and (Luis) Aparicio; those were two Hall Of Famers. Those things will keep you in ballgames."

**ML:** People forget that the race that year was very close until the Sox went into Cleveland and swept four straight in a three-game weekend series to put some distance be-



**Jim Landis as a White Sox. Photo credit [www.ootpdevelopments.com](http://www.ootpdevelopments.com).**

tween the two teams. Tell me what you remember from that crucial series? (Author's Note: On Aug. 28 the Sox went into Cleveland with a 1 1/2-game lead. By the time they left on Sunday night the lead was up to 5 1/2 games after the sweep. The Sox won 7-3, 2-0, 6-3 and 9-4, with Bob Shaw, Dick Donovan, Early Wynn and Barry Latman getting the wins.)

**JL:** "I remember the place was packed. (Author's Note: The smallest crowd for that series was the Saturday day game, which drew more than 50,000.) That didn't bother me or the guys because we played before large crowds all year. The way we looked at it was that we had a great chance here and, in fact, that made us play even harder. We knew what was at stake, but we were a very close team that was always helping one another."

**ML:** Then in September you went back to Cleveland and clinched the pennant. Both Billy Pierce and J.C. Martin told me the whole atmosphere was pretty wild especially when you got back to Midway Airport. What do you remember about that night?

**JL:** "Everybody was happy in the locker room, there was a lot of hugging, a lot of back slapping. I'll be honest with you; we had a few belts on the plane back to Chicago! Nothing out of hand but we were really happy. We were elated, in high heaven that night. When we got back to Chicago and saw all the crowds, (Author's Note: The *Chicago Sun-Times* the next day estimated the crowd at 100,000 at the airport early in the morning.) we just let it go. I remember 'Bubba' Phillips, Bob Shaw and I just started singing on the bus ride back to where our cars were parked. Even our wives were surprised at how we acted that night. But that's why you play the game; it's the greatest feeling in the world to know you're going to be in a World Series."



**Jim Landis congratulates Nellie Fox after his 14th-inning home run beat the Tigers on opening day, April 10, 1959 in Detroit. Photo credit Leo Bauby Collection.**

**ML:** In the series itself, you and the Sox destroyed the Dodgers in Game 1 11-0. But after that it seemed the Sox played tight the rest of the way. Johnny Roseboro shut down the running game and rookie reliever Larry Sherry had the series of a lifetime. (Author's Note: Sherry had two wins and two saves in the six games. He threw 12 2/3 innings, giving up one run with an ERA of 0.71.) Looking back over the years, what do you think went wrong?

**JL:** "We weren't on base enough. The games were all close, tight ones and when that happens you've got to be careful when you do get on base. You have to give the Dodgers credit; they had a good team with pitchers like Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale. Throw in Sherry and they shoved our bats up our fannies! They also had some breaks... I mean Sherry came out of nowhere and Chuck Essegian, who wasn't a home-run hitter, got two pinch-hit home runs!"

**ML:** You also had the best view of one of the most phenomenal catches in World Series play pulled off by Jim Rivera in Game 5. Can you tell me about that? (Author's Note: In the last of the seventh with the Sox leading 1-0, the Dodgers had men on second and third with two out. Charlie Neal was the hitter. Al Lopez pulled an outfield switch moving Al Smith from right to left field and bringing in Rivera to play right. Jim McAnany was removed from the game. Neal then crushed a Shaw pitch deep into the right center field gap at the Coliseum. After a very long run, Rivera caught the ball over his shoulder, ending the inning and saving the game)

**JL:** "I never could have caught that ball. What made that catch even more incredible is that it was absolute hell in the Coliseum because you couldn't see the ball! I don't know how Jim saw it. It was a sunny afternoon game and you had nothing but fans wearing white shirts! Later in that same game I lost a ball in the sun. I squinted and thought I knew where it was, but it wound up hitting me in the toes!"

**ML:** During that off-season, owner Bill Veeck felt that if the Sox were going to win in 1960, they had to have more power. A series of off-season trades resulted in the Sox sending out youngsters like Norm Cash, Earl Battey, John Romano, Don Mincher and Johnny Callison. When you and the guys showed up in Florida that spring did everybody kind of look around and ask, 'What's going on here?'

**JL:** "We sure asked, 'What the hell is going on?' We knew how good those kids were because we saw them in the spring. Every single one of the guys we traded wound up making the All-Star team in the next few years. We figured that we won the pennant without power in 1959 and we had to be better because these kids were going to get better. I don't know why they (management) thought we had to go out and get more power."

**ML:** In 1960 you won your first Gold Glove, the first of four straight. What makes a good outfielder? How much of it is pure ability and how much of it is knowing the hitters, knowing how your pitchers are going to throw to hitters in certain situations and knowing the parks you play in?

**JL:** "All of that helps, outside of just working hard. You know one of the best pieces of advice I ever got was from our trainer, Ed Froelich. He told me to stay relaxed by looking up at the sky between pitches and when our guy was into his motion, to bend, take two steps forward and move to the ball. That advice made me get great jumps on balls that were hit. You also had to stay on your toes."

**ML:** Was there a stadium or two that was harder to play in than others?

**JL:** "Yankee Stadium was tough. It was 430 feet into the power alleys and you had those monuments out in center field. I actually had to go around them once or twice trying to get to a ball. You couldn't dive after a ball unless you were sure you had it because if the ball got past you it would just keep on rolling. They also had a drainage dip in the outfield that slanted downwards. It happened twice where I had to charge a ball and was running down that slope, caught the ball and then fell forward because your momentum was going downwards.

"Fenway Park was also tough because of the wall. A few times I'd be going back on a ball and would be very close to it. When the ball hit it, it would bounce back over my head towards the infield. It took a while before I was able to understand when to get close to the wall and when you had to back away from it."

**ML:** In 1962 you made the American League All-Star team and played in the game in Washington D.C. What do you remember about that?



**Jim Landis rounds third base headed for home at Tiger Stadium in Detroit. Photo credit [www.ootpdevelopments.com](http://www.ootpdevelopments.com).**

**JL:** "I remember two things. When I was growing up, I admired Stan Musial. In those days both teams stayed at the same hotel. Well I come out of the hotel getting on the bus to go to the park and who's looking right at me? Stan Musial. I got to sit next to him on the bus and we talked. The other thing I remember is that I got into the game and came up to hit and the pitcher for the National League is Bob Shaw. I got a real funny feeling because I didn't want to hit against him. He was my friend and my teammate for a number of years."

**ML:** By 1964 you were one of the veterans on a team that was involved in a gut-wrenching pennant race with the Yankees. What were the last few weeks of that race like? The Sox closed out the year winning nine in a row and still finished one game behind New York.

**JL:** "It was a terrific battle. We knew what we had to do and that was keep winning. I know when I was taking off that uniform after the last game, I felt great and sad at the same time. We finished one game behind them! Al (Lopez) really paid us players a

great compliment because he never called any team meetings down the stretch those last few weeks. He knew we were grown men."

**ML:** Speaking of Al Lopez, your relationship with him really deteriorated in 1964. You were benched for a stretch and a couple of Chicago reporters, including Bill Gleason, tried to patch things up between you two. What happened?

**JL:** "The Sox lost our player rep, I think it was Charlie 'Paw Paw' Maxwell and the guys wanted me to take over for him. I said that I'd do it temporarily until we could formally elect a guy. It turned out that the Sox players decided that whenever we would appear on a major radio or TV station, like WGN, we wanted to get \$50 for it. Most of the time we were getting a transistor radio for doing it. Well as player rep, I was the club spokesman and Ed Short (then-Sox general manager) came downstairs and I told him that. Short got mad at me and I got the brunt of it. I don't blame Al, he wasn't going to buck the GM. Al didn't talk to me for a long time and I was benched for a long spell. I started Opening Day, then sat a long time."

**ML:** Do you think that caused you to get traded to the A's after the season?

**JL:** "I think so. Mike Hershberger and I went to Kansas City. The Sox went with some young guys and that's OK. Every so often change is good for you. I figured that as long as I was still in Major League Baseball, that was fine." (Author's Note: The deal also involved Cleveland with the Sox getting back Tommy John, Tommie Agee and Johnny Romano.)

**ML:** After you retired in 1967 what did you do for a living? Players weren't making \$15 million a season then.

**JL:** "I got into the sign business. It really was a lucky break because a good friend of mine had a company and he told me that the U.S. government was cracking down on signs for safety and such. I bought a quarter share of his company and was a sales rep. You had companies like Safeway Supermarkets that had to redo signs at all their stores nationally. My name didn't hurt me either, especially in the Midwest. People knew me from playing."



(From left) Minnie Minoso, Jim Landis, Luis Aparicio and Nellie Fox show their Gold Glove trophies to the crowd before a game at Comiskey Park. Photo credit [www.whitesoxinteractive.com](http://www.whitesoxinteractive.com).

**ML:** You were named by Sox fans to the All-Century Team at one of the outfield spots. Were you surprised that Sox fans would remember you like that?

**JL:** "Yes, and I was very grateful. What I'm most proud of is the number of guys from that team in 1959 that made it... Nellie, Billy, Louie, myself. We had a real good team then."

**ML:** Regarding your physical situation right now, what happened and how things are going for you?

**JL:** "I had my hip replaced and afterwards I kept feeling a lot of pain. Everyone thought that it was pain from the recovery process. But finally I told them it was pretty bad and they took an MRI. The MRI revealed that a screw had come out, which was causing the issues. But so much time had passed that my legs atrophied and I already had a bad back before the operation. I was a mess. I'm in a wheelchair now as I try to regain some mobility with physical therapy. At least I can get around with that. My wife and I go out to eat; I've been able to watch my grandson's Little League games...so I'm hanging in there."

"I also wanted to thank the fans and the White Sox for remembering me. They've sent cards, letters...some have called and as far as the Sox, Bob Grim and his people have kept in touch and are doing what they can to try to help. I'm grateful and appreciate that so much."

**ML:** Did you enjoy Chicago and the years that you played there?

**JL:** "Sure. The Sox had great fans. As far as the city, we weren't homebodies. We'd go out and take in the great restaurants, the shows. The guys were very close. Sometimes a half dozen or so of us would go out and eat, then come into the locker room at the same time."