



La Russa traces the rise and fall of the 1983 'Winning Ugly' Sox

By Mark Liptak

Posted Friday, February 21st, 2014

Second of a two-part series of a wide-ranging interview with Hall of Fame-bound Tony La Russa. Part 1 can be accessed at <http://www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/files/CBM-Tony-LaRussa-20140217.pdf>.

In this part, La Russa recalled what happened on the field in the years he managed the White Sox in the 1980s, how things went south that led to his firing, if he ever came close to returning as Sox manager and how to this day he remains close to the organization.

Mark Liptak: Even with the strike in 1981, the Sox finished with a winning record. In 1982 they won 87 games. By 1983 they were considered a legitimate threat to at least win the division. The pieces were falling into place and that spring training the Sox had the best record in baseball at 20-7. But, according to Roland Hemond, you told him not to expect the Sox to get off to a quick start and that's exactly what happened. What gave you cause for concern to where you told Hemond that?

Tony La Russa: "We were going to rely on a mix of veterans and young guys. Both can have drawbacks early in the season. For the veterans it's the cold weather that impacts them. When all is said and done, they'll produce and get their numbers, but when the weather's bad that can result in a slow start. Our young guys were really young, and inexperience can beat you early in the year. We were counting on everyday kids to help us in Greg Walker, Scott Fletcher and Ron Kittle and we had a bunch of younger pitchers, but they all needed time. You were there, Mark, on opening night in Texas. Greg made some key errors and we wound up losing the game. I just thought it would take a little time to get it together."

ML: History shows that by May 26 the Sox were 16-24 and there was talk about you being fired. In fact, talk about that started in July 1982. Hawk Harrelson made the com-



Tony La Russa during 1983, his peak White Sox season.

ment that September on the WFLD-TV (Ch. 32) special “Next Year is Here...” that what “saved” the season was that you didn’t become paranoid with all the rumors, that you didn’t let that filter down the dugout and impact the players. What was that time period like for you personally? How could you not let that affect you?

TLR: “I knew the heat was on, but I also knew we were better than this. Remember our philosophy; you learn, you teach, you practice it. Having a good frame of mind is part of what we teach. When you get into a difficult situation, are you going to give in to it? Or are you going to tough it out? I just didn’t want to hear or read about all the negativity.”

ML: Then the turnaround started and a big reason for it was your decision to bat Carlton Fisk in the No. 2 spot in the lineup. Former *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Ron Rapoport told me that was a brilliant move because no one would think of putting a power hitter in a bat control spot in the lineup. What was your reasoning for the Fisk move?

TLR: “Paul Richards told me one time that you never want to be in a situation where you say, ‘I’ve tried everything and it’s not working...it must be the players.’ Richards said there’s *always* something else you can do or try. Carlton was struggling early in the season. This guy was a Hall of Famer, he had the talent, he was giving the effort, but it wasn’t working and it was getting to him mentally. He got hurt and didn’t play for several days. Remembering what Paul told me, I went to Charlie Lau and talked with him about it.

“We had a deep middle of the order with guys like ‘Bull’ Luzinski, Harold Baines, Tom Paciorek and had I left Carlton there by the end of the year he would have produced his numbers. But sometimes a different look can help you mentally so I thought, after talking to Charlie, that maybe moving him up in the order would give him a different responsibility and help him. It was a nice change of pace for him because now Rudy Law gets on and Carlton starts taking a pitch or two to see if Rudy will steal a base. Then, maybe he hits a ground ball to the right side and Rudy gets to third, or if he’s in scoring position, Carlton’s going the opposite way and drives in a run. Before long, Carlton really embraced that spot in the lineup and it was a tremendous help to the team.

“This was the first time I had ever tried something like this and I took it with me to Oakland and St. Louis. I had Dave Henderson hit second in Oakland and I had guys like Brian Jordan and Ray Langford hit second in St. Louis. These were guys who could

La Russa start as Cardinals manager recalled on podcast

Related to the two-part interview with Tony La Russa is the regular “Diamond Gems Flashback” podcast. In the latest edition, a radio interview with La Russa early in his first season as Cardinals manager in 1996 is replayed. La Russa cinched his eventual election to the Hall of Fame with St. Louis.

Go to www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/videos-audio/Tony-LaRussa.mp3 to listen to the interview, conducted by Chicago Baseball Museum historian George Castle when he hosted the syndicated weekly Diamond Gems baseball show.

hit the ball out of the park and drive in runs. The other benefit was that it turned the lineup over and gave at-bats to guys who could win games...how many times have you seen a game end before the third or fourth hitter in the lineup could get that one additional at-bat?"

ML: The Sox then put it together and exploded in the second half. They went 46-15 the final two months in one of the best stretches in baseball history. Starting pitchers La-Marr Hoyt, Rich Dotson and Floyd Bannister were 42-5 after the All-Star break. Team chemistry was so good on that club, according to Jerry Koosman in his interview with me. Ron Kittle and others told me about how the players would stay in the clubhouse after games to talk and about the team parties on the road. That club was a throwback, weren't they? They loved the game and really seemed to care for each other.

TLR: "Fisk was on that 1975 Red Sox club, Koosman was on the 1969 Mets, Tom Paciorek made the playoffs with the Dodgers and 'Bull' Luzinski was on those Phillies teams that made a number of playoff appearances. But you ask any of those guys and they'll tell you the most fun they ever had was on the 1983 White Sox. That was a classic team. There was no attitude from anybody... not the veterans or the kids, that team was so tight and it wasn't just the players and coaches...it was (trainer) Herm Schneider; it was Willie Thompson and the clubhouse guys. It was everybody all focused on winning.

"The other thing that was special about the club was we embraced the pressure that was being put upon us. We'd lose two or three games in a row and the talk would start about another Chicago team folding...no Chicago baseball team had won since 1959, the Cubs collapse in 1969, all of that. We said the hell with that; we're going to win anyway. That team was so relentless.

"As far as the team parties, that was something I started doing in Knoxville. I was paying for them out of my own pocket and I wasn't making a lot of money, but I thought it was good for the team to be around each other. Eventually the owner heard about it and he started paying for them. I did it in Chicago. It was something like, 'We're going to get together from six to 7:30, then you can go do what you want...' It brought the team closer together and they were a close team, there were never any bad fights or arguments in the clubhouse that season. And sometimes I would do it even if we hadn't won a game. In Texas we lost opening night, lost again the next day. Before the third game I said, 'We're getting together to celebrate Scott Fletcher getting engaged.'"

ML: On Sept. 17, 1983 the Sox won the division, beating Seattle 4-3 at old Comiskey Park and are postseason-bound for the first time in 24 years. What was that experience like for you?



Tony La Russa (right) began his short apprenticeship as a manager at Double-A Knoxville in 1978.

TLR: “I remember that I was thinking this is a series of steps, can you take a team and have it qualify for the playoffs...then can you win them? As far as the moment itself I was ecstatic, euphoric...we did it! Our unit pulled it off!”

ML: The ALCS against Baltimore was another story, the Sox just couldn't hit. I've read talk that perhaps the victory party downtown right before the playoffs started may have put undue pressure on some players. Looking back, did that have an impact?

TLR: “That's a really good question. I don't think it was good to push 'Bull' (Luzinski) to be our spokesperson. He was from Chicago and we had him speak for all of us, but I don't think the rally itself did anything to hurt us.

“I think the issue was that I didn't do a good job of getting the team to turn the page, to let go of the fact that we won the division and had to start over. That's on me. When I went to Oakland I met John Madden and he told me the same thing, that after the Raiders won the Super Bowl they had a bad season the next year and John said it was because he didn't get the guys to go back to zero and start over. I could have done more to get the team ready. That being said, we did win the first game on the road (Author's Note: The Sox won Game 1 in Baltimore 2-1 behind a complete-game six-hitter by Hoyt), we just got beat by the world champions.”

ML: After the Sox lost Game 4 in the way they did...it was excruciating and Baltimore celebrated on the field. But both you and Jerry Dybzinski faced the media afterwards and answered all the questions. That showed character, other guys might have ducked out and blown them off. Did you remember what you told the team after the loss?

TLR: “I told them the obvious things; that we had to acknowledge what happened, but we also knew that we'd cherish this forever. If you lose, as long as you gave it your best shot, that's all you could ask for. Even though we lost the memories won't ever be forgotten.”



Tony La Russa (center) was not yet a national household name when he appeared on "To Tell The Truth" in Nov. 1980. The panelists did not guess who the real La Russa was. The Sox manager won \$500 on the show.

ML: The Sox were the consensus pick to repeat in 1984. You had won seven straight and were in first place at the All-Star break, yet things fell apart in the second half, and

you ended up with a losing record and way out of the chase for the division. Ron Kittle told me, when I interviewed him, he thought the team quit and that's a direct quote. What happened?

TLR: "I always appreciated Ron's candor and his willingness to say what he feels. I disagree with him, though, I don't think the guys quit. Often when you look at something to evaluate it, you go to the first line or two and stop. Sometimes you need to look a lot deeper and that's what I think happened in 1984.

"Here's what I mean. Carlton Fisk was hurt and missed time (Author's Note: Fisk played in 102 games in 1984 and hit only .231). That was a significant part of our lineup



Tony La Russa made a lasting impression in his first big-league managerial stop. Here he signs one of hundreds of autographs at the 2013 Pitch and Hit Club Banquet.

that wasn't available. Julio Cruz signed that big contract in the off-season and I don't blame him or his agent for getting it, but it affected him. He was never comfortable with it, he was trying to justify it and he regressed as a player and finally we traded away Jerry Koosman and that was a major mistake.

"In 1983 Dennis Lamp was the leading guy out of the bullpen and everyone in the organization felt we needed to strengthen the back end. We traded Koosman for Ron Reed and that would have been OK except that nobody, including myself, recog-

nized the impact that he had on this team. It was a big mistake. Bull' (Luzinski) and he were like brothers and if I remember right, Greg retired after 1984 and didn't have a good year. (Author's Note: La Russa is correct as Luzinski retired after 15 years in the big leagues after the season. In 1984 he had only 13 home runs and 58 RBI's after producing 32 home runs and 95 RBIs in 1983.) I think the vibe of the team would have been much different in 1984 if we had kept him."

ML: In 1985 the Sox rebounded with 85 wins and you had the pleasure of managing future Hall of Fame pitcher Tom Seaver. What was that relationship like?

TLR: "I have that 1985 team high on my list of favorites because they had great chemistry and showed great character after what happened in 1984. You remember Ozzie Guillen was Rookie of the Year that season. As far as Tom, it was one of my greatest

fortunes to be with him those two years. He won 15 games each season and he had the most brilliant mind to go with his great talent. He taught me a lot, he taught me how a pitcher thinks...how a *winning* pitcher thinks and sets up hitters.”

ML: Hawk Harrelson took over in 1986 as GM and he had his own views on how things should be done. Examples were wanting to move Carlton Fisk to left field, hiring Don Drysdale as a pitching consultant even though you had a pitching coach and requiring that all Sox minor-league coaches be former big-league players. It just seemed like oil and water and you eventually were let go in June. Did you just know from the beginning it wasn't going to work out?

TLR: “It hurt. I had a great experience with the White Sox family and then suddenly you're out of the family. The thing is, to be fair to Hawk and Don and the organization, given what those men accomplished in the game you can't discount their opinions, they earned the right to be heard. I think what should have happened looking back is that if the organization wanted Hawk to take over, he should have had the right to hire his own manager. He should have gotten a new manager right from the start. I should have been called in at the end of the 1985 season and let go...and I would have been OK with that. I would have thought that I had a nice run and it was time to move on. I don't know if that's something Hawk wanted to do at the time, however.”

ML: Over the years you'd read or hear stories from time to time about you returning to the Sox as field manager. Were you ever close to coming back at any point?

TLR: “There was one chance and it almost happened because we were getting new ownership in Oakland. Mr. Haas had announced he was going to sell the team; this was before his health problems started. In the winter of 1994, before spring training in 1995, I thought I was going to manage the Red Sox. But Mr. Haas asked me to lunch and wondered if I would stay one more season. I had also looked at Baltimore as a possible job because my preference was to stay in the American League. The next year I left Oakland and there was some discussion with the White Sox. I had talked with Ron Schueler, who was the Sox GM and who was my pitching coach with the Sox in 1981 and who I worked with in Oakland. The Sox, though, decided that Terry Bevington was the right man for the opening and gave him the job.

“Soon after that, Walt Jocketty called me. He had gone to St. Louis after the 1995 season and took over as GM. I talked to Sparky Anderson and he told me that one time I should manage in the National League because the situations were so different from the AL. I thought it over and when St. Louis offered me the job, I took it.”

ML: You'll go into the Hall of Fame this August as one of the all time winningest managers. Have you ever wondered what may have happened if you stayed with the Sox? I know Sox fans wonder how many championships you might have won had you stayed for 20 years or so.

TLR: “Yes, I do, but more for entertainment, I don't take a lot of time to look back in a serious manner. I just think you have to move on from the past, learn from it and go forward. I will occasionally tease Jerry (Reinsdorf) about it, though.

“I honestly think had I stayed with the White Sox for 30 years that the team would have won multiple world championships. I think that because we were so united. Everyone from the owners to the front office to the coaching staff was on the same page. Our minor-league system was developing and we had good people in all areas.”

ML: I’m sure you know Reinsdorf many times has publicly stated the biggest mistake he ever made was letting Hawk Harrelson fire you. (Author’s Note: An example of Reinsdorf’s thought process came in Rob Rains’ book *Tony La Russa: Man on a Mission*. “I never should have allowed Tony to be fired. I’ve often said that was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made. I knew it was wrong. I knew it was a mistake. And I let it happen anyway.”).

TLR: “I appreciate his comment, that’s very nice of him to say that.”

ML: My colleague at the Chicago Baseball Museum, George Castle, wanted me to ask you, if there was time, what you remember about Opening Day 1973 at Wrigley Field?

TLR: “There were two highlights in my major-league career, which shows you the type of career I had. I was the first player to get a pinch hit for the Oakland Athletics after they moved from Kansas City and the other was that I scored the winning run on Opening Day 1973.

“We were playing Montreal. I had a good spring and made the team. It’s the ninth inning and Ron Santo walked. Whitey Lockman looks down the dugout and told me to run for him. So I’m at first base and it suddenly hits me, ‘If we don’t score, I’m probably going to have to play third base.’ The problem with that was that I had a bad arm for a long time, that’s why I made the switch to second base; you just have to make that little flip throw. I could always get by because I was able to warm up, get the arm loose and I knew what I could do that day. But here it’s 35 degrees, I’ve got no time to warm up and I’m thinking, ‘I’m probably going to have to run to the pitcher’s mound before I throw or roll the ball to first base...’ Fortunately we kept the inning going and when Jim Hickman walked I scored the winning run. That was my last appearance in the big leagues as a player.”



Tony La Russa judiciously spreads out his three World Series rings on his hands.

ML: To wrap up, can you sum up your days with the Sox?

TLR: “Sure. The White Sox gave me my first opportunity. I would never, ever disrespect the organization or the years I spent in Chicago. I appreciate what they did for me so much. I learned a lot from the opportunity. I learned about family and about rela-

tionships in my time there. They will always be a big part of my heart. Every time I see people like Jerry and Roland, we embrace.

“I’ll tell you something, Mark; I spend more time socially with people from the White Sox than I do with people from Oakland or St. Louis. I’ll give you a couple examples. Over the summer I had dinner with Jerry (Reinsdorf), Art Kusnyer, Jim Thome and Tom Thibodeau, the Bulls coach...I really like him by the way. Just a few weeks ago I had dinner with Jerry, Buddy Bell, Jim and Bo Jackson.

“The thing that struck me about that dinner was how vitally interested and concerned Jim and Bo were about getting the fans back engaged with the team. To have two of the best hitters I’ve ever seen show that much concern was impressive to me and I feel the same way. I’m committed to do what I can to help rejuvenate the passion and support of White Sox fans towards the team. Now I understand the Sox themselves have to give the fans a reason to get engaged, they have to start playing better baseball. Last year was painful to watch, but if I can do anything to help that along, I will.”

ML: Tony, I’m grateful for the time you showed me and the Chicago Baseball Museum today. This was a big thrill for me and a highlight of the many, many interviews I’ve done with members of the Sox family.

TLR: “It was a lot of fun for me, too. I enjoyed looking back and talking about those times.”