

BASEBALL DIGEST

★★ WORLD SERIES EDITION ★★

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By Abe J. Shear
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Timing is everything (along with a little luck). One of the goals of this now 15 year old baseball series of interviews was to gather perspectives from a broad range of people, a task that has become more difficult as the series has continued. So (the luck part), I was talking with my friend Shaun Clancy (who knows everyone), and he asked if I wanted to interview Jeff Idelson, the recently resigned president of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Of course I did.

Driving to Cooperstown from Albany, NY is a pleasant ride, one I first made in 1995 why our son, Adam, took ten (10) of his friends to Cooperstown for his Bar Mitzvah party. Arriving early I feted myself to lunch at the Otesago Resort Hotel where a perfect hamburger (ballpark food) was available. While Cooperstown is hardly a metropolis, the Hall of Fame is like a ball inside a well-worn baseball glove in this beautiful little community, one where people walk around, mostly in baseball logoed clothing.

Jeff made arrangements for us to use a hotel conference room and the conversation began, essentially him talking and me asking a few questions. Jeff's experiences have been fascinating and his career routing a lesson on how we can challenge and reinvent ourselves.

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Jeff Idelson "Hall of Fame Perspective"

I am here with Jeff Idelson and I'm really pleased to be doing this interview. Jeff, where did you grow up?

Abe, I grew up in the Boston area, Jamaica Plain specifically. Then, when my parents had four children, we moved to Newton, Mass.

And you must have grown up a Red Sox fan?

Oh yes. When you grow up in a city with a major league team, you don't really have that choice if your parents are baseball fans. So, from the moment of birth, I was told that I was a Red Sox fan, even though my parents were very democratic.

Were both of your parents baseball fans or did they come to baseball? Did they learn baseball or were they born into baseball?

They came to learn baseball at an early age. My mother's dad was a big baseball fan. My dad learned it on his own. He was left handed. He grew up in Providence. His favorite players were Stan Musial and Ted Williams and my mom loved everybody. The first game I went to, at age 5, was with both my parents and my grandparents to Fenway Park and I still remember it well.

And you sat where at that game?

I don't remember the exact section, but we were in the right field grandstand, beyond first base, between first base and foul pole. And I remember, as every kid does, you come in and you see the expansive green, you can't believe it. I was no different than any other kid.

What may have been different with me than other kids was that I remember vividly about this first game is nothing that anybody on the Red Sox did, but that Brooks Robinson made a number of great plays and I wondered who he was. So, the first player I really became familiar with, more so than just hearing the name, was Brooks Robinson.

Well, he was a pretty classy third baseman. On the early teams, when you were 5 and 6 and 7, who were your favorite players?

Growing up, I was a big Carl Yastrzemski fan. When I was a little kid, Carlton Fisk was one of my heroes. As I got into my late grade school, early middle school, Jim Rice, Fred Lynn. I was a big Dwight Evans fan because of defense and Rick Burleson. I primarily liked the guys with who excelled defensively because I was a very mediocre little league player who was good defensively but couldn't hit.

My wife and I, before we got married, I was rooting for the Reds and it was a great series in 1975 with the Red Sox.

We went to two games in that World Series too, the 4th and 5th games.

I've got a great memory sitting on my living room floor with my parents, game 6 which the Red Sox won. I remember them wanting me to go to bed, but my complaining that there was no way I was going to be going to bed. I was 11 and I have great memories of watching, you know, on the snowy television, Fisk's homerun and then going to bed.

Probably Bernie Carbo won't be

known for anything else. You played baseball as a youngster?

I did and I peaked at age 12 like most kids. I did love playing little league ball. It was a very important part of my life.

And you played what position?

Center-fielder and, you know, a marginal hitter, good defense and speed.

Fenway Park is remarkable. Tell me, why is that ball park so special? What

a while I would splurge. I liked the Fenway Sports Bar which was an ice cream. It was vanilla with a chocolate stripe down the middle. That was pretty tasty and once in a while I'd get a hot dog, but the ice cream bars were my favorite.

What's your favorite ball food now?

Ballpark food today?

Beer doesn't count.

I think I learned to score with my dad. My dad taught me to score right away. I remember getting the program and we'd fill up the score card and, you know, then as I worked in baseball, it became something I did every day. I still love keeping score. It keeps me involved.

Do you keep score on your own score book or do you buy score cards?

I have a score book now. I used to do score cards. I have a score book that I got the last year I worked with the Yankees and I just use that.

When you were a child, did you collect memorabilia?

No. I mean, I collected pictures of my favorite players. The local supermarket would have a deal where you spend \$20 and you got an 8x10 of your favorite Red Sox. I was constantly trying to eat as much as I could so my mother would have to buy more food and get more of these photos. But I never collected anything. A few autographs like the other kids did, but I was just more concerned with following my team in the newspapers.

In the mornings, did you read the paper, did you look at all the box scores?

There was nothing better. For me, I even got a paper route when I was young so I could see the box scores even earlier. You know, that was kind of important to me. Nothing beat the Boston Globe every morning, their stable of incredible writers in all sports, but the box scores were my favorite page. Sporting News,

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is it that makes it so remarkable?

What makes it remarkable is a number of factors. Number 1 is its location in Boston in the Kenmore area. It's a downtown ballpark. Number 2, it's the smallest ballpark in the majors, or it was when I was growing up with 33,583 seats, not including standing room, and that made it intimate. The Red Sox were not good, which most people don't realize, until this millennium. So, they were lovable losers. You rooted for them. They were your hometown team. And the audience that went to Fenway seemed very familiar. You felt like you were part of a big family.

The fact that there was no parking around there made people just kind of wander in from all directions together. They still do.

They do. As kids, we went in by the T. My parents were really strict on education, but there was never any discussion or argument about my going to opening day. I went to every opening day growing up and I'd always take the T in with my friends. Public transportation is great there.

Did you go to other stadiums when you were young? Did you go to minor league stadiums? There are so many of them up in New England.

I didn't. I got to Yankee Stadium a couple of times because I had family in New York, but that was the extent of it. Mostly, just Fenway.

As a youngster, what was your favorite food at the ballpark?

Wow, we didn't eat a lot of the ballpark food. Back then, you brought your food. Your mom packed the sandwiches. It was that kind of thing, but once in

No. I mean ballpark food has become incredible. It's representative of the local fare which is nice. So, there is nothing better than a bratwurst in Milwaukee. Chicago dog in Chicago. If you are going to go sodium nitrate, those are the stadiums to go to.

Since you've been to so many ballparks, how would you critique the ballparks today? Which ones do you really like?

Well, most of the reasons I love ballparks is just for the feeling I have when I am there. Fenway ballpark is a feeling of home. AT&T, the Oracle in San Francisco. The difference between Fenway then and now is that I am 50 years older. I mean the same fandom, same interest, but beyond Fenway, it's AT&T, Oracle, Camden Yards in Baltimore, Pittsburgh's ballpark is absolutely gorgeous. I love going to

“I stayed being a vendor at Fenway through my junior year in college.”

Seattle. I love how San Diego is situated downtown, it makes it very inviting.

Those are probably among my favorites.

I like Pittsburg a lot. What is your favorite place to sit at a ballgame? As a spectator, where do you like to sit?

I don't really care where I sit as long as I can see the entire field and I don't have a steady stream of fans in front of me because I like to score when I go to games. So, anywhere where I can really enjoy it is fine with me. It doesn't need to be a box seat. It just needs to be an unobstructed view of the field.

Who taught you to score?

of course, was a big deal.

I grew up reading Joe Falls and all those guys. Sporting News, now nobody knows what that was. Sporting News was phenomenal. It was a baseball publication.

Well, you didn't get only the box scores either. You got in depth stories which was great. I agree with you.

So, where did you go to college and were you still following baseball when you were in college?

Well, I was a vendor at Fenway Park growing up and I took that with me when I went to college. I went to Connecticut

College in New London, Connecticut and majored in international economics but I stayed being a vendor at Fenway through my junior year in college. I continued to follow the Red Sox. Fall of my senior year in college, I went to career counseling. The career counselor said, "What are you going to do with your life?" I said, "I don't know." She suggested that I go back to school and get a masters in economics. I said, "No, I don't really want to do any more school." She said, "What do you like?" I said, "I like baseball, I've been a vendor at Fenway since I was 15." She said, "Why don't you apply for a job in baseball." It never dawned on me. So, I wrote a letter to Eddie Kasko, who was the scouting director of the Red Sox and had been manager of the team.

graduated college on June 1 and the Red Sox had a great year and I was able to have a number of assignments all the way through the World Series, which gave me a lot of exposure to a lot of other people within the industry. In '87, there wasn't a job available so I came back and was offered the job to produce the Red Sox radio broadcasts. I sat in the booth with Ken Coleman and Joe Castiglione for two years.

Well, you clearly knew a lot about radio!

Yes. So, Ken Coleman, who I grew up listening to, and Ed Martin and Jim Wood. Anyway, I worked with Ken and Joe producing and doing stats for them for a couple of years while I was applying for jobs and not able to get anything. In the beginning of

What was your career path there?

I started in January of '89 as the Assistant PR Director for Harvey Green who is a legend in that industry. He had gone to the Garden, the Cavaliers where he worked with World B Free, then the Yankees and Dolphins. He hired me as his assistant and then, two months later, he quit. So, I went to not having a job in baseball for 2+ years to becoming the head of PR for the Yankees at age 24. I ended up doing that for 5 years and loved it, loved every minute of it. Then I just decided in the middle of my 5th year that it was time to do something else. At that point I had just gotten married and I wanted to start a family. I wasn't from New York, so, I left the Yankees and went to the World Cup (Soccer). It was my only foray out of baseball. I went for 14 months. I built their dial-up bulletin board system, which pre-dated the internet. While I was at the World Cup, I was looking at jobs in college athletics. I was talking to the New Jersey Devils. I thought about maybe working in hockey. Then I got a call from Cooperstown, and to get a call from Cooperstown if you're not a player is pretty unusual. They asked me if I had any interest in coming up and potentially being their PR chief. So, I took a spin up and decided I liked it and wanted to try it. I took the job on my 30th birthday in 1994 and started about a month later, right in the middle of the baseball strike.

Had you ever been to Cooperstown before?

No, never had. I came up to look. As big of fans as my parents and grandparents were, when you grow up in New England you tend to go north and south and you don't go west. You either go to the mountains, to northern New England or you go to the beach on the Cape. My parents never came to Cooperstown. I came here and said, man it's just like New England, this is gorgeous. It was not like New York City and I fell in love with it.

It is a beautiful community, just gorgeous. Okay, so now you've left the Hall of Fame.

Yes, with 25 years on the books. The last 11+ I've served as President and decided it was time to do something else. So I built a new program called Grassroots Baseball with a partner. That program

“So, all of a sudden, I am working with the writers I grew up idolizing.”

He played for the Reds.

He played for the Reds. Managed the Red Sox. I basically wrote a letter to Kasko and asked him if I could be an apprentice at scouting. He said no and connected me with Dick Bresciani, who was the PR chief for the Red Sox and that's how I got in. Baseball was obviously something that I always wanted to do and I made a career out of it.

When you went to the Red Sox and you started a career, did you feel then that you found, sort of, the industry you wanted to be in?

Absolutely. I mean, I have to tell you Abe, I obviously had a number of temp jobs and internships growing up and sat in an office and worked on an assembly line but there was nothing better than being at a ballpark. I wasn't only getting paid, but sort of getting paid to be at a ballpark. And then, I knew nothing about PR because it didn't really exist as a major, but what I did know was how much I loved reading the newspaper. So, all of a sudden, I am working with the writers I grew up idolizing and for me that was almost as exciting as the game on the field.

From where you started, how did you move up in the organization?

So, I started in '86, five days after I

'87, January, the American league was looking for an assistant PR director and I knew the PR Chief very well, Phyllis Merhige, having worked with her at the World Series 3 months earlier and she encouraged me to apply. I was going to be named assistant PR director for the American League in April '87. The day before they were to name me was the 40th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's breaking the modern day color barrier. Al Campanis went on ABC Nightline, I believe, with Ted Koppel, and talked about how African Americans were great athletes but did not have the capacity to work in front offices. So the next morning, Dr. Brown, who was the American League President, said we can't hire this guy right now. There's 6 people in this office and we are all white and it doesn't look right. So, it took me 2 years before I got a job in baseball because of affirmative action, which is a good thing, and I was right in the middle of it. I applied for 5 jobs but didn't get any of them and then, finally, after the '88 season, 2 assistant PR jobs opened up, Baltimore and New York. I applied for both of them and I got a job with the team I grew up despising but it was the best thing that could ever happen to me. **So, you started with the Yankees in... '89**

is about promoting and celebrating the amateur game which isn't getting a lot of love these days, and growing it in underprivileged communities, to give kids who maybe don't have that opportunity to play baseball and grow the game a little bit. So, my partner and I are doing this in a not-for-profit way. We decided where we wanted to launch, along Route 66. The reason we came up with the Grassroots Program is my partner is a photographer who put out a book on grassroots baseball, amateur baseball. We tied hall of famers into it. It's called "Grassroots Baseball - Where Legends Begin" and as I worked on this with her I realized how much I was missing the amateur game as well. So, after 8 years at the major league level, 25 years at the Hall of Fame level, I've gone all the way back to square one and working in the amateur game.

How much of the work that you will do will be fundraising in order to make this program successful?

Some of it's been fundraising. It's a part of it. Having worked for the Baseball Hall of Fame, that's a big part of museum work. Right now, this is a modest program, so I haven't done a ton of fundraising, being that there are just two of us as employees, but as we grow I think the business will become bigger and there will be more fundraisers.

In your mind how does baseball become as special for the youngsters today as compared to when you were young?

It's different in the demand, there's a different marketing approach, the way people consume information is different from when you and I were kids and today there is so much competition for sport and there is so much competition from social media and marketing and the immediacy of needing success that the way the game is going today probably appeals to the younger generation. They are trying to speed it up. They are trying to make the players the focus as superstars and that's attractive. I think to younger kids now a days, with the economy being 20 times what it was when I was a kid, there's way more travel teams. You have to sort of embrace travel ball though it is at the peril of grass roots. Kids seem to want to stay and continue to play baseball year

round. So, it's a challenge. I don't have an exact answer and I know baseball struggles with it, as do other sports, because it's bigger than any one thing.

Just the other day we were talking about various problems with baseball. Part of baseball's problem is that these are slow games and there are really bad games on TV.

The proof will come ten years from now or five years from now when you see how many tickets are sold.

Can baseball be a global game?

It can become more than it is. Nothing is truly global like soccer or the Olympics. I think baseball has done a great job pushing internationally and trying to make it a global game.

Could you see real exhibitions between US teams and international teams, in spring training or at other times?

You could and it would need to be that. The Olympics has not worked. You see some of that with the WBC, and I think the biggest challenge is to build infrastructures in other countries.

So as a long-standing baseball executive and manager, can you still go watch a youth baseball game?

Very easily, which is why Grass Roots Baseball is my passion. I get great satisfaction out of going to American Legion games, Pony League games, talking with coaches and parents. I'm really at home at amateur games.

So a lot of what you will do in the future is interviews, trying to sell the game itself?

Yes, that's the goal, and to sell baseball in underprivileged communities

Going back as a cousin to the issue of global baseball, it seems like some of the sports, like football and basketball, have almost twelve month seasons. What about baseball? Can baseball be 12 months?

Well, it's a challenge but the infrastructure is there. You look at baseball season right now, it goes from February to October. You're talking November through January. If you look at Caribbean play, there's a special series and all of the teams from these countries playing all winter long. That takes you to January. I still think they have the opportunity if you look at what football did – London is now essentially a weekly event, it's no longer a special

game. Baseball has the opportunity to play special games in different communities.

If you could be the baseball commissioner for a day, not that the baseball commissioner does not do great job, what would you do differently? What would you want to change?

That's a good but tough question. I think my focus would be on the game itself and maintaining the game's integrity and working to assure that you always have your best talent, your best product, on the field. The way pitching staffs are managed today I fear that your burn rate over ten or 20 years will be massive and your level of competition will dwindle. I think, it's not easy, and is obviously something Commissioner Manfred is focused on. To me, the game on the field is what needs the most help right now.

One of the doctors for the Braves said he believes that children only have so many throws and that's one of the problems with youth baseball is that they throw too much.

I concur. If you are repetitive in any sports, in anything, eventually it's going to catch up with you, and that is true beyond wearing out your arm. You are, hopefully, developing the other muscles, your arms and legs, but we get that by playing multiple sports.

I think when you look at the best pitchers today, like Kershaw or Verlander, they are fundamentally pitchers and not throwers. They have a wide range of speeds.

There are throwers in the game because that is what GM's want.

I'm out of questions – what should I have asked?

That was pretty good. You were really thorough.

Thank you – and good luck with your new initiative.