

# *Fun While it Lasted*

## **Donn Seidholz Interview**

Donn Seidholz introduced himself to me over the phone as 'a Crash Davis character'. It wasn't the first time I heard a retired ballplayer compare himself to Kevin Costner's minor league journeyman from *Bull Durham*. In Seidholz's case, though, the comparison came across rather more on point than usual.

The Chicago White Sox picked Donn— a boyhood Cubs fan from Chicago's northern suburbs — in the 8<sup>th</sup> round of the 1974 amateur draft. The 21-year old third baseman, who led the Big Ten in hits in 1974 at the University of Indiana, reported straight to the Sox' Class AA farm club in Knoxville, Tennessee. And there he stayed, summer after summer, until the end of the 1970's, playing parts of six seasons for the KnoxSox in all.

That wasn't why I called up Donn though.

I needed to hear about two months he spent with the Panama Banqueros in 1979, part of an insane and all-but-forgotten Caribbean boondoggle called the Inter-American League.

The '79 season began with Donn gambling and carousing on the ball club's dime in the Canal Zone during the final days of American sovereignty. It ended a few weeks later with Donn and his teammates broke and stranded inside the Panama City's Gran Hotel Soloy, the league bankrupt and the streets outside teeming with soldiers and clouded by tear gas. And in between, it rained. And rained.

After baseball, Donn got into the radio business and later worked as a sales executive for ClearChannel and NetJets. Now retired, he makes his home in Omaha, Nebraska and was generous enough to share a few stories with me recently.

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Donn Seidholz spoke with *Fun While It Lasted* on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This interview was transcribed from audio and has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

*Interview begins after the jump*

**FWiL:**

Tell me about getting drafted by the Chicago White Sox.

**Donn Seidholz:**

I'll never forget. I got drafted and I'm driving down to Peoria to play in some summer league. I'm listening to the freaking broadcast of the Sox game. **Harry Caray** goes:

'Holy cow! What the fuck is going on here? We just drafted a North Side kid' – cause I was from Wilmette, Illinois on the North Side and I was a Cubs fan – 'to play for the South Siders and the world is turning upside down!'

**FWiL:**

You were in the White Sox farm system for 5 or 6 years. So how did you make the transition from being a Sox prospect to ending up in Panama?

**Donn Seidholz:**

Well, when I signed I was supposed to be the heir apparent to **Bill Melton**. In fact they gave me his uniform when I got to Knoxville and said 'if you mind you P's and Q's you're going to be the next third baseman for the White Sox'. Well, I quickly demonstrated that I didn't have the talent that was required.

I did well enough. I probably could have played Triple A for, you know, 30 years.

**FWiL:**

The classic Quadruple A guy....

**Donn Seidholz:**

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

I went through the system and came up with a lot of kids. **Tony [LaRussa]** was manager at Knoxville in 1978. And we had **Harold Baines** and **Dick Dotson** and **Britt Burns** and I was kind of the Crash Davis person.

**FWiL:**

What was the sales pitch or the lure to get you down to Panama in this new independent league – the Inter-American League – during the winter of 1978-79?

## **Donn Seidholz**

In 1976 I went to training camp with the White Sox. There was a gentleman named **Bob Oliver**. Bob used to play for the Kansas City Royals and he had a fairly illustrious career. Bob Oliver pulled me aside one day and he said:

*'Donn, I don't want to piss you off. You have some holes in your swing and I don't think you're going to be making it to the Big Leagues. And here's what I think you ought to do. Go play in South America, Mexico, whatever. Make a lot of money and enjoy yourself and tour the countries.'*

And so a few years later **Bob Maduro** called me after we had won the Southern League championship in Knoxville with Tony and he said 'You want to come down and play in Panama?' And I said 'Yeah! Sure. Why not?'

It mean it was a fascinating time. I totally enjoyed it. The Miami [Amigos] team was hysterical. It was all these expatriate Baltimore Orioles people like **Davey Johnson** and the Tyrone brothers.

## **FWIL:**

How quickly could you tell that the Inter-American League was not going to be what was advertised?

## **Donn Seidholz:**

Well, we had a great time for about two weeks. All the travel was just incredible. We had to fly into Maracaibo and into Caracas. We were staying in the most unbelievable hotels.

One of my friends from the White Sox was a guy named **Pat Kelly** who used to play for Chicago. He had a bar in Caracas. He said 'You have to be very careful. It's a really great city and it's a lot of fun, but there's a lot of interesting elements there.'

We were sitting outside the Hilton in Caracas having dinner one night and there was a car full of people. I don't know what they were doing, but there was gunfire and people chasing down the streets ... I mean it was hysterical. Same thing with Maracaibo. You get into Maracaibo and everyone in the airport's got a machine gun.

Maracaibo was where **Luis Aparicio** was the manager of the team. We got there for batting practice and they had military in both ends of the dugout and they're all armed with assault weapons.

And then the rain. The rain started. It rained every freakin' day that we were down there. And when I say rain, it wasn't just like sprinkles. It was two or three inches in an hour. I don't know how we ended up playing. In Panama we had this tarp but nobody knew how to get it on the field. They hired a bunch of kids to pull it out on the field and it would take them about an hour to get half of the tarp out and it didn't cover the infield.

The bottom line is one of the reasons a lot of the teams went out of business was because of the rain. We got rained out more than ... it was unbelievable. And then you figure we were flying and we were staying in these magnificent hotels. The place we stayed in Panama was just unbelievable.

### **FWIL:**

Yeah, actually the way I got your name originally, Donn, was I was looking through some old articles and you were featured in a Miami newspaper right after the Panama team went out of business. You had just gotten home and in the interview you were recounting being holed up in the Gran Hotel Soloy in Panama City and watching students riots in the streets and basically being trapped in the hotel.

### **Donn Seidholz:**

Well, we were trapped in the hotel. And it's funny, because they just left us there. We were supposed to have all our expenses taken care of. And this is really terrible, but they actually paid for all of our gambling and all of our alcohol. We would hang out up on the rooftop, they had a pool up on the rooftop and, you know, everything was good and the team was doing well.

And then the whole Inter-American League went bankrupt and we were left there. And there were a bunch of us. We were trying to get out and the hotel was saying 'Well...you owe all this money'. We were trying to negotiate and that didn't go very well.

It was me and **Mark Oestreich** and we got to the airport, but we had no money. This was a very scary time in Panama. There were military on every corner. It was just before we gave the Canal Zone back to the Panamanians.

We got to the airport and none of us had any money. The only way we got out of town was there was this guy from AT&T and he was a scuba diver that was laying some undersea trans-Atlantic lines. He said 'What are you guys trying to do?' and we said 'We are trying to get out of here'. And he goes 'I'll loan you some money' and I think it was only ten bucks each and we actually managed to get out of the country. But if we hadn't had that money we would have been stuck there.

**FWiL:**

I heard the crowds were good in Venezuela. What were the crowds like for the Panama Banqueros? Did anybody come out to the games?

**Donn Seidholz:**

Well, no! I mean it was like 95 degrees and the humidity was like insane. And ... no.

**FWiL:**

Did you ever meet the guys who owned the team?

**Donn Seidholz:**

Yeah. Bob Maduro. Yeah. Very nice. I mean when we first started, it was great. The checks were cashing, we were making money, we were living high on the hog in the hotel. It was great.

Honestly ... they had this huge media deal with all the teams. They were supposed to be broadcasting all over South America. I think the thing that really killed them was the weather. I'd love to say that it was mismanagement but the big thing was we just never knew if we were going to play. This is the way it is in South America. It rained every day at 4 o'clock like two inches. And you would see small children and animals and houses washing down the gully and ... there's just no way.

So then they tried to move the games up to mid-day. I gotta tell you ... trying to play baseball on the equator at noon? Not fun. I thought Columbus, Georgia was hot. This was just nuts.

**FWiL:**

So all things considered, any regrets about the adventure or was it worth it for the stories for a couple of months?

**Donn Seidholz:**

Oh, Hell no. I'd do it all over again.

A friend of mine, **Bobby Glass**, who used to play in the Kansas City Royals system ... I think he was with the San Juan club. He came down to visit and got in the night before and we went out to the Canal Zone, which is where you get into lots of trouble. And we did.

We got to the ballpark about an hour before game time. And {Bobby] was the catcher on the other team. I got up and I was batting third. We were both feeling kinda under the weather, if you know what I mean.

**Porfirio Altamirano** was on the mound. And Bobby looked up at me behind home plate and said 'Dude, I'm going to do you a favor. This guy throws like 99 miles an hour. I'm going to call fastballs. Three in a row. You just sit and watch and you can go back to the dugout and have a hot water bath.'"

And Porfy went on to have an illustrious career with the Phillies.

**FWiL:**

What was the money like down there?

**Donn Seidholz:**

Oh, it was tax free! I think I was making two grand tax free with all the expenses covered.

**FWiL:**

How did that compare to being a double-A prospect in Knoxville in the 1970's?

**Donn Seidholz:**

My first paycheck after being drafted out of college ... I think the most I could make was \$500 a month. And then they paid us \$7 a day for meal money when we were on the road. And it was very interesting because we'd go on a 14-day road trip and they'd give you \$7 times 14 and we'd all go out and spend it the first two days and everybody starved after that.

**FWiL:**

Who were some of the other guys who stand out in your memory?

**Donn Seidholz:**

I've got a whole roster of guys I used to play with. You know, **Goose Gossage** ... I lived with **Jim Bouton** for a year.

**FWiL:**

Where was that?

**Donn Seidholz:**

That was in Knoxville. When he was tried to make his comeback doing his knuckleball thing. I think I was in Mexico and I came back and they threw me in a room with him. We were staying in Days Inns. And he was a piece of work.

**FWiL:**

I interviewed a guy last year that you might have crossed paths with. [Former White Sox farm director] **Charlie Evranian**.

**Donn Seidholz:**

Oh shit! Really?!

**FWiL:**

Yeah. He takes credit for putting Tony [La Russa] in Knoxville.

**Donn Seidholz:**

Oh. No. He's full of [it]. You know who did that? **Roland Hemond**. Rollie put Tony in Knoxville. Tony – he'd just finished law school. He was playing triple-A and he got bored. He was one of those choke-up singles hitters and [played] great defense. Smart guy. He was one of the absolute best managers in any field that I've ever run into.

I'll tell ya ... I've worked for a lot of people. I worked for Warren Buffett for years. I've seen a lot of good people. Tony was one of those few people that you'd walk across hot coals for anything he wanted you to do.

He would find something good that every guy on the team did regardless of whether we won or lost. So you walked out of that ballpark – and you could have lost 15 to nothing – thinking: 'OK, I did some good things, I did a bad thing but, like, there's a future.'"