

Mel Stottlemyre

Contributed by Chris Yandek
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1964 saw a rookie for the New York Yankees on the mound facing Bob Gibson of the St. Louis Cardinals in the World Series. Though Mel Stottlemyre never won a World Series as a starting pitcher, he did get a few rings as a pitching coach for both the New York Mets and New York Yankees. His five decades in baseball are profiled in his new book *Pride And Pinstripes* where he gives you his honest perspective about the people he worked with in the New York baseball market.

Listen to the Mel Stottlemyre Interview

{audio}http://thesportsinterview.com/mp3/Stottlemyre.mp3{/audio}

Chris Yandek: You really don't hold anything back in this book. You are very open about your battle with cancer in this book and what you went through. How has it changed your life?

Mel

Stottlemyre: "Well, it's changed it tremendously. It's made me look at situations and everyday life a lot differently. I think it opened my eyes to a lot of things that were going around me. I think I am more in tune with the day to day living and I think it made me enjoy some things I really took for granted."

CY: You feel that the cancer you battled and as well your son who you lost to leukemia might have been caused because of treatments you had as a player?

MS: "The only reason I brought that up was cause the doctors I had been involved with. Over the years, my involvement with the Leukemia Society and continually studying reasons why these things like this happen. The link that I had when I was player was some radiation therapy for my shoulder. It seems to be very interesting to them. It's a belief of mine that it did actually have something to do probably with my son contracting leukemia and who knows, maybe it was involved with my cancer too."

CY: Are you disappointed that the Yankee medical treatment wasn't as good or as prestigious as the team was?

MS: "Well, I think it was just the way of times, that particular period of my life and those years. I don't point the finger at anybody or any reasons or anything like that. It's just something that's been very interesting to my doctors and it's sort of a belief of mine. Like you said, I didn't really hold back anything in the book. It's my opinion, but the disappointment as far as the doctoring then, I think people were being treated the best they knew how. I just think our times today with the treatments and the stuff we have for cancer has made it still a terrible word, a terrible disease, but I think we've come that far in the treatments."

CY: You really make it clear in the opening of the book that you weren't happy the way your playing career ended with the team. How were you able to return to the team as the pitching coach years later?

MS: "Well, it took me a long time to get over the way I was treated at the end of my career with the Yankees as a player, but time seems to heal a lot of wounds. I think by the time there was an opening on the Yankee staff, there was an opportunity for me to return to the team that I had played for. I came back excited and it was the same type of excitement I had as a young player joining the Yankees in 1964. I had that same type of excitement returning to the Yankees in 1996."

CY: When you took the pitching job in 1996 with the New York Yankees you even state that you thought you wouldn't be there long since George Steinbrenner always went after the pitching coach first. You wrote that George wanted you to go to the papers and blast the pitchers during their slump one year, but you told him that's not the way you were going to do it. Why wouldn't he let you guys just do your job?

MS: "Well, I think it was a combination of things. Number one, I think he constantly wanted to feel like that he sort of had the hammer hanging over your head and that sort of thing. When I took the job, I said I'd do the job the best way that I could, but it would be my way sink or swim. If I was not going to be successful, it was going to be because I'd done things my way. I wasn't going to be influenced too much by George or his people. Therefore it led to a couple of conflicts early in my coaching career there with the Yankees. I think once I made a stand sort of to George for a few years anyway, it sort of made it easier for me. I think he realized that basically I was stubborn enough and felt like I knew enough that I was gonna do things my way and he backed off quite a bit."

CY: You write, "He [Steinbrenner] can be the greatest guy in the world as long as things are going his way." How would you describe him when things aren't going his way?

MS: "Oh, I would describe him as very defiant, looking for somebody to take the blame. Sometimes it really didn't have to be anyone that was involved real close to the problem. It could be anyone within his organization. It seemed like that he always had to have the final say and somebody had to pay with the loss of a job. That doesn't go with my thinking, but I tried to not let those things influence my thinking too much and bother me on an everyday basis. Finally, I think it did bother me so much that I had a hard time leaving it at the ballpark and it was time for me to walk away."

CY: As a player, you got to be part of teams with Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford. What are your memories of both of them?

MS: "Oh, they're tremendous. They are tremendous memories of two people who are very competitive at the top of their sport. There were people that I had admired growing up. I was fortunate enough to be able to even though it was at the tail end of their career and the start of mine. It was a real honor and privilege to be able to be on the same field with them. We play in the backyards as kids and have boyhood idols and I was fortunate that I was able to play with two of mine."

CY: What was it like facing Bob Gibson in that 1964 World Series?

MS: "There was a lot of excitement the fact that I was rookie and was called on to be able to pitch any of the games at all in the World Series. It was an opportunity. It didn't turn out to be a good one. To face Bob Gibson three times in the '64 Series, at that time I didn't recognize necessarily the importance of it and what I was up against and that sort of thing. I have grown over the years to realize how great a pitcher he was. Maybe it softened the loss of the seventh game, the fact that I lost to one of the greatest pitchers of that era. At that time, I wasn't too familiar with Bob Gibson, but I got real acquainted with him before the series was over."

CY: You had a career ending shoulder injury as a pitcher in your early 30's. Why do you feel it was hard for you to move on after the Yankees cut you?

MS: "When the Yankees cut me due to an injury, there was a story basically behind the story. I think I cover that in the book quite well to where when I left, I left with hard feelings and terrible feelings toward the Yankee organization and especially the people in charge at that time. Namely Gabe Paul who's the general manager and even George. I carried that chip for quite sometime. The chip on my shoulder finally fell off when I decided I would try to return to the Yankees as a coach. It seems like today when I think back about it, it's a much simpler operation than it was to me at that time. I was so loyal to the Yankees as a player that it just seemed very difficult for me to accept the fact upon my leaving they weren't very loyal to me."

CY: As a pitching coach, the only guys you ever seemed to have trouble with were David Wells and Jeff Weaver. Why do you feel these guys didn't have the work ethic they could've?

MS: "Well, that was just them. David Wells is David Wells. It upset me to see someone with so much talent really not putting all the effort into it that he could at times. I felt like that he's been a great pitcher. I thought that he could even be a greater one yet. I always thought it was my job, no matter who I had to work with. What I had is to try to bring out the best of them and to do things that would keep their career on top as long as I could. I had a conflict with David Wells. He didn't see eye to eye with basically my procedures and that sort of thing. Bottom line, he just didn't want to put the effort into it, to work at it as hard as he should've, to maintain the level of excellence that he had for a period of time. With Jeff Weaver, it was I think more than anything else, was just a matter of stubbornness over the style of pitcher he wanted to become. He had an excellent career with Detroit before we got him and even though it was short. He hadn't been in the league too long. He looked at himself as a power pitcher. I looked at himself as sinking fast ball, good breaking ball, and controlled type pitcher. We just clashed. Since that time, he's had sort of an up and down career. I still follow him very closely because he's a guy that I thought perhaps maybe I should've been able to help more than I did while he was in New York."

CY: You really cared about Dwight Gooden while you were with the Mets. Why do you think the Mets organization wasn't tougher on him during his drug problems? It just seemed like they weren't as tough on him as they could've been.

MS: "Well, I think looking back, we all agree what you say is something that should've been done, but I guess they didn't want to meet that problem head on and get perhaps as strict with his situation as what they should've. I look back and think that the Mets and maybe myself should've done some things to try to be a little stricter with Doc and tried to make sure basically we steered him the right way, whatever it took. Certainly the off the field bad things that he got involved with, there is no question about it that it killed his career at a very early age."

CY: Being around baseball for as long as you have, do you think the performance enhancing drugs were a problem with the game or in the game?

MS: "Well, I think they are somewhat a problem in the game that baseball is addressing that situation the right way now. They are making penalties a lot more strict and making players pay attention a lot more closely. In defense, some of the players that were on the performance enhancing drugs for a while they were not illegal. Certainly players will try to get that edge any way they can over their opposition. To say that it was wrong before even though it could be very damaging to our health and we should be naturally aware from that. I kind of blame baseball for laying back too long in addressing the situation until it got so much out of hand that they had to take an active role."

CY: I know things are different from year to year, but why do you think they haven't got the job done since 2000?

MS: "Well, the biggest thing is that their pitchers on the staff have not been really ready to up themselves a little bit and seek a higher level at playoff time. I think you can look at their experiences in the playoffs as far as won and lost. In recent years, their pitching staff has not been as quite as dominant as what it had been not only in previous years, but maybe even previously during the season. The key is to have your pitching staff at the top of its game if you can at playoff time. I don't think the Yankees have been able to do that for several years."

You can find out more information about the book, tour, and purchase a copy of *Pride And Pinstripes* at the link below:

www.harpercollins.com/books/9780061174087/Pride_and_Pinstripes/index.aspx

About Mel Stottlemyre

Mel Stottlemyre pitched for the New York Yankees from 1964-1974. His one World Series appearance was during his rookie season in games two, five, and seven against the St. Louis Cardinals and Bob Gibson. As a young player, he would get the chance to play with two of idols in Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford. He retired at the age of 31 due to a career ending shoulder injury. Stottlemyre pitched in 360 games with 164 wins and 139 losses. Mel would make his return to baseball in 1977 with the Seattle Mariners for five seasons and then moved over to the New York Mets for ten seasons as their pitching coach that included the 1986 World Series victory. From 1995-2005, Stottlemyre would return

to the New York Yankees as their pitching coach where he was part of four World Series. Through all his baseball accomplishments, he won a battle with myeloma in 2000 and inspiring thousands. His new book *Pride And Pinstripes* is an honest look at his life in baseball and all the high profile people he was around.