

The Day I Met Ted Williams

A sports reporter remembers his interview with a baseball legend

By Paul Betit

By the time I interviewed Ted Williams in 1986, I had met plenty of luminaries, in and out of sports, and written about them. At that stage of my journalism career, I wasn't in awe of many people. My wife and kids, maybe, but that was about it.

In the spring of 1976, while working at *The Kennebec Journal* in Augusta, I spent about an hour with Jimmy Carter who tried to convince a skeptical young reporter how his two terms as governor of Georgia had adequately prepared him to serve as president of the United States. It was early in Carter's campaign, and I was the only member of Maine's Fourth Estate to sit down for a one-on-one with him.

Boston Red Sox legend and Hall of Fame catcher Carlton Fisk once gave me five minutes before a luncheon meeting of the Augusta Rotary Club. Fisk, who was hawk-ing hotdogs at the time for Augusta-based Kirschner Meats, talked to me about hunting for wild boars. Fisk buzzed through the interview and never made it clear just where he hunted for the wild pigs. As a result, I was unable to work that part of the interview into my coverage of his appearance before the Rotarians. I'm glad I finally got to use the information.

Another time I interviewed NFL Hall of Famer Gale Sayers, who was in Maine to visit a friend in Fayette. His buddy owned a summer camp for teenagers and Sayers was doing a newspaper interview to help publicize it. The somewhat reticent Sayers seemed uncomfortable, and that made me uncomfortable, but he relaxed enough to show me the surgical scars on both knees, injuries that prematurely ended his stellar football career.

I also interviewed former Red Sox left-handed relief pitcher Bill "Spaceman" Lee



Bud Leavitt and Ted Williams. Courtesy of Bangor Daily News.

after he retired from Major League Baseball and began playing first base for a semi-pro team in Moncton, New Brunswick. His main message? Playing baseball anywhere beats working for a living. When I asked him whether he had a job during the offseason, Lee responded, "A job? A job? What's that?"

By the time I met the Splendid Splinter, I was a seasoned journalistic veteran. I just had to keep my cool and be professional.

It was the year the Sox ended up losing the World Series in seven games to the New York Mets. Williams had teamed up with longtime Maine outdoor columnist Bud Leavitt for a series of television commercials for J.J. Nissen Baking Co. It was August and they were filming on the golf course at the Samoset Resort in Rockport.

Williams, who at one time was tagged as the world's best sports fisherman as well as being arguably baseball's greatest hitter of all time, and Leavitt were longtime fishing buddies. I was writing a feature for the *Maine Sunday Telegram* about their relationship.

Both men said they met during Williams' rookie season in 1939. At the time Leavitt was a cub sportswriter for the old *Bangor Commercial* and was covering the BoSox. Sportswriters were allowed in the dugout before each game, and when Williams heard that there was a young sportswriter from Maine covering the game, he sought him out.

"Hey, Rook," Williams recalled saying to Leavitt. "How's the fishing up in Maine?"

"You'll have to come up and see for yourself," the blunt-speaking Leavitt retorted.

The two young men hit it off, and Williams took Leavitt up on his invitation.

Back then, Monday was normally an off-day for the Sox, so sometimes following a Sunday doubleheader at Fenway Park, Williams took the train to Bangor from North Station. After spending Monday fishing with Leavitt he'd take the last train that night back to Boston.

It seemed like a nice little story.

As I wrapped up the interview, Williams asked for my opinion—possibly the only time in more than forty years as a journalist anyone I was interviewing wanted to know what I thought.

"What about that trade?" Williams asked. "Is it a good one?"

A couple of days earlier, the Red Sox dealt shortstop Rey Quinones, pitchers Mike Brown and Mike Trujillo, and a player to be named later (who turned out to be outfielder John Christensen) to the Seattle Mariners for outfielder Dave Henderson and shortstop Spike Owens.

In those days, Williams spent most of his summers casting dry flies for Atlantic salmon in the upper reaches of the Miramichi River on the northeast side of the Canadian province of New Brunswick. As far as media reports were concerned, it was a virtual black hole back then. Williams wanted to know the details.

That very morning I read a story about the trade in the *Portland Press Herald*. I knew the stats of every player involved and could give Williams an honest appraisal.

"Dave Henderson is a real good center fielder and he has some power," I told him. "A lot of people don't know it, but he's hit seventy-nine home runs in three seasons with the Mariners, and that's the team record."

"As for Owens," I continued, "he's got good range at shortstop, and he's a switch hitter." Gesturing with my hands, I added, "He's a good bat from the left and a good bat from the right."

Williams nodded. "Seems like a good trade then."

"I think so," I answered.

That brought the interview to a close.

The film crew had to wait to set up the final scene of the ad shoot. Armed with a thirty-five-millimeter Canon, I also waited so I could photograph the two stars while they sat at a picnic table munching on sandwiches

made from Nissen bread.

The crew set up next to the fairway on the par-five fourth hole. The signature hole at The Samoset, it ran for about 500 yards down a hill toward the famed Rockland Breakwater, a stone jetty that extends for more than 4,000 feet out to a lighthouse marking the entrance to Rockland Harbor.

While we waited, Williams sprawled out in a golf cart to catch some rays. At this stage of life, Williams, just a few days shy of sixty-eight, was a big man. He nearly filled the entire seat.

Every once in a while, a golfer, while looking for his ball in the hay-like fescue next to the fairway, recognized Williams and exchanged waves with the baseball legend.

One intrepid golfer, a hacker from New Jersey who had shanked his second shot wide left, began talking baseball with Williams.

I sat close enough to hear the conversation but too far away to participate politely. I didn't want to intrude anyway.

"What about the trade?" the golfer asked.

"Seems like a good one," Williams answered.

Then he leaned forward and spoke with authority.

"Dave Henderson is a real good center fielder and he has some power," Williams explained. "You know, a lot of people don't know this but he's hit seventy-nine home runs in three seasons with the Mariners, and that's the team record."

"As for Owens," he continued, "he's got good range at shortstop, and he's a switch hitter." Williams then gestured with his hands. "A good bat from the left and a good bat from the right."

The golfer was impressed.

"Wow," he said, shaking his head in wonderment as he walked past me after leaving Williams. "Teddy Ballgame has still got it."

"He certainly does," I agreed, just loud enough for only the hacker to hear.

—Paul Betit worked as a newspaper reporter for more than forty years,



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