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Interviewee: George Plimpton and Willie Stargell

Interviewer: Michael Gannon

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G: Hello, and welcome to *Conversation*. On this particular *Conversation*, I have the pleasure of talking with Willie Stargell who played baseball for twenty years in the major leagues, was most valuable player in the National League, twice led his team – the Pittsburgh Pirates – to a world championship, and was co-recipient of the 1979 Sports Illustrated Athlete of the Year Award. Willie is now a narrator of a new musical production which has received rave reviews, he is an adviser traveling with his old team the Pittsburgh Pirates, and he is also working with minor league teams in that particular national league club system. Willie, welcome to *Conversation*.

S: Thank you very much.

G: And George Plimpton. George, your face and your name are known to millions of Americans. You are a literary figure of note, a longtime editor of the *Paris Review* (one of the most distinguished literary quarterlies in the country), but I suppose more popularly you are known as “the liver-out of our fantasies.” You have made our dreams come alive as a onetime quarterback of the Detroit Lions.

P: Last string [quarterback].

G: [You were also] a member of the Boston Celtics basketball team. [Were you] again a bench warmer?

P: Power forward.

G: [You were] a member of the Boston Bruins hockey team.

P: A goaltender.

G: You played percussion with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. [Did you play] cymbals or drums?

P: Triangle.

G: (laughter) I can do that!

P: Oh no, you cannot. [It is an] extremely difficult instrument.

G: All right, I take it back. And then [you were] a pyrotechnic expert of note. I believe that you conducted the fireworks display at the Centennial of the Brooklyn Bridge just a short time back.

P: [I was the] choreographer, really.

G: Thank you George for coming on *Conversation*.

P: Thank you for having me.

G: I thought we would talk about sports. Here is a gentleman, in Willie Stargell, who lived a real life sports career, and George, I hope you will not mind if I say, you have lived a fantasy sports career. Each of you is in love with athletics in our society. I would like to find out what role athletics does play in our society, and what relationship it has with other cultural forms. Willie, there is one thing on the minds of a lot of people today, and that is the pressure under which athletes live. Some athletes have run into difficulties, [both] moral and legal, that have been highly publicized of late. Growing up in baseball, did you find yourself as being under pressures that you found different from the pressures that other people experienced?

S: No, quite the contrary. When I was growing up, [I had] a desire to play the game of baseball, but that was just a childhood dream. I would always fantasize with the idea of taking a round object and hitting it squarely with another round object, which is theoretically impossible. But I have always just enjoyed that eye-hand coordination – to be able to hit something and then to drive it for distance. I took such great joy [in that sort of activity] that I basically used all my time doing that. All my energies were somewhere in the neighborhood around a baseball and a bat. As far as pressures were concerned, I always felt that if you are having problems doing something, the best place to solve those problems is on the field. When I was coming along, you were paid, basically, for what you did [on the field]. If you had a great year, you knew you could go in and negotiate and get some additional money. However, if you did not [have such a good year], you knew that there was a chance that you were going to get cut. Now there is free agency, which is a good thing for the game and I think there is no question about it. But with free agency owners are paying the players on what they think they are going to do, and right away that puts that individual under a tremendous amount of pressure. When I say that, it means that for the first time these guys are going to have to excel [to the level] they are supposed to [be at], and they are expected to do that right away, although it would normally take them four or five years [to do that].

G: Do you think that salaries are out of line for the people who play professional sports?

S: I cannot say that it is out of line. [For instance], I think if someone walked in here and said, we are going to give each one of you a million dollars, nobody is going to say that is too much money. That is what you are talking about. You

never heard of one case where a ballplayer has been accused of literally taking a sawed off shotgun and going [to management] and forcing that money to be presented to him. None of the owners that I have heard of have said that they cannot afford to pay these players the amount of money that they are giving them. I do not think we have seen it to the point where it is going to level off, because cable and paid television have not yet entered into the picture. You may see a guy making as much as \$3 or \$4 million a year.

G: Is there the same disparity in baseball as one finds in football, where the older players are not making as much as the younger players [who are] just being recruited into the game?

S: [That might be true] for the guys who have [already] proven themselves, but whose career is fading out. But Dave Winfield [professional baseball player] and the guys who are really making a tremendous amount of money have put themselves in a position where if they are with the ballclub for the next five or ten years and continue to exercise their ability to play the game better each year, then they are going to make much more money.

P: Of course, it is true, is it not, that the money does not come out of the fan's pocket. A lot of people make that mistake. It comes out of the owner's pocket.

S: Exactly.

P: The price of a seat in a baseball stadium has not really gone up very much, has it? It is still \$3.50 in New York; it is the cheapest thing in town. The fellow who puts the price on that seat is an actuary who determines that price based on what price will get the most money out of potential audiences.

S: True. Whether on radio or TV, the money [the station and the club] make from local commercials can pay everybody in the club's entire minor and major league system, including administration, and the club will still have money left over. And I am not even talking about the network money, which is coming. It is a tremendous and very lucrative business. You expect a person who forks up a lot of money to run a business to make money. And they [the owners] do.

P: There is something wrong with a society which pays those vast amounts of money for someone to hit a ball over a fence. Whereas the school teacher, who has a presumably much more important job in theory (teaching kids), gets paid something like \$15,000 or \$16,000 a year. The answer to that, of course, is that when Willie Stargell hits a homerun over the fence, he creates, at least in Pittsburgh, a great joy and a sense of euphoria. He is creating a great artistic function which is very hard to measure in terms of money.

G: That is a cultural phenomenon in itself, is it not? An elevation of the spirit.

P: Oh, it is terribly important. I know a theologian, a fellow called Michael Novak. He once said that a city would be in worse shape for losing its baseball team than its church or its symphony orchestra. I did not say that; I would be too nervous to say that. But he is a theologian, so he understands how important to the community it is for someone to hit a homerun over a fence. Although next to the teaching of Horace [outstanding Latin lyric poet and satirist under the emperor Augustus, 65 BC-8 BC] or Homer [presumed author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*], [it] does not seem like very much [to me].

G: You grew up visualizing yourself as an athlete.

P: I did exactly what Willie wanted to do. I wanted to hit a round ball with a stick, and I probably spent as much time thinking about that as he did. But something happened. [Perhaps] I did not get the right coaches. [laughter]

G: It was in the coaching to be sure.

P: I think the innate ability was not there. But I still dream about it. James Thurber [American writer and cartoonist, 1894-1961] once said that 95 percent of American males put themselves to sleep at night striking out the batting order of the New York Yankees. And that goes on until you are about ninety-four, I guess.

G: You interviewed James Thurber for the *Paris Review*. Did you talk about Walter Mitty [daydreaming hero in the short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" who is Thurber's quintessential urban man]. I think of Walter Mitty when I see you on television or read your books. There seems to be something of Walter Mitty in you.

P: He was a daydreamer. His daydreams [were strictly] in his mind; he never actually had to try them. When you do try a daydream, and you get out there and throw a pitch as I did to Frank Thomas of the Pittsburgh Pirates, and it ends up in section 37 or whatever in Yankee Stadium, that is not Walter Mitty. [Ernest] Hemingway [American novelist and short story writer, 1899-1961] once said that the sort of thing that I did was the dark side of the moon of Walter Mitty, which was a nice way of putting it, I think.

G: Actually living out that dream in reality....

P: Is a nightmare.

G: With the Detroit Lions did you get banged up badly?

P: No, but I lost twenty-nine yards in four plays, which is not particularly good. I did the same thing with the Colts; once again, to do a television show. I went in

there as a quarterback for four plays, and we made seventeen yards when I was in there. Fifteen of them on a roughing-the-passer penalty.

G: Congratulations. [laughter]

P: It is not quite the way I expected to pick up yardage, but it will do.

G: Did you get to throw a pass in any of those games?

P: I went [out] for a pass.

G: You had your heroes, and Willie had his. I would like to ask who your heroes were when you were kids. Willie, who were you heroes? They were predominately in baseball, I would assume, since that is the sport you entered?

S: I grew up in the housing projects in California, and my idol was actually a fellow who lived in the projects. He was the high school's greatest football player, and he was also president of the student body. So he was the figurehead in my life. Then as I really became in-tune with the organized game of baseball, I was particularly interested in left-handed hitters like Stan Musial, Ted Williams, and Mickey Mantle, when he did hit from the left side. The year I got into organized baseball (1959) was the same year that the Giants called up Willie McCovey. It was the awesome display that he put on out there in the Bay area that really gave me that push that I would need to get motivated in terms of getting [to the major league level]. But I would have to say the one guy [who was my hero growing up] was the football player I mentioned, **Marion Mays**, who right now is a postal worker in Oakland, California.

G: He did not play on a major team?

S: No. His football career ended at Humboldt State University.

G: Willie, you wear a medallion with a numeral eight. Was that your number with the Pittsburgh Pirates?

S: Yes, for twenty years.

G: That was presented to you on the occasion....

S: When I was married, my wife gave this to me, so I hold on to it. When things really get bad, I can melt it down. [laughter]

G: They have retired the jersey with the numeral eight on it have they not?

S: Yes.

- G: Did they ever retire any of your jerseys, George?
- P: I do not think anybody has ever worn the number zero, which is what I wore for the Detroit Lions, so I guess they have.
- S: **Neil Oliver** wears that now.
- P: Does he? My jersey? [laughter]
- S: Your jersey.
- P: See, there is the answer; it was not retired. Then I wore double zero for the Boston Bruins. In football, Jim Otto used to wear that _____. They did not retire that one. So the answer is no. I wore number twenty for the Celtics. I am sure that has not been retired.
- G: Who were your heroes growing up, and where did you grow up?
- P: In the East – in New York and in Massachusetts. My hero was in baseball, which I always thought was and is the best game. And that was Carl Hubbell. I wanted to pitch. I had that James Thurber thing, and he [Hubbell] was a screwball pitcher like Fernando Valenzuela [left-handed pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers]. What was interesting about him was that he had thrown so many of these things that his arm was deformed. When he walked along, you could see that there was something wrong with his left arm. It stuck out like this [demonstrates]. That is the way I walked around when I was eleven, in the hope that somebody would say, hey look, there goes a screwball pitcher. I really emulated him in every way. I walked the way he did, and I wore my baseball uniform the same way he did (he was called “highpockets”). I was right-handed, and I would have given anything to be left-handed. But that was the end of the similarities. **Cliff Milton** was another one. He was the first pitcher I ever saw when I was taken to the Polo Grounds by my father. He had great big Mickey Mouse ears. He was another left-hander. I do not know why I picked all these left-handers, but I could wind up and pretend to be him for hours back then.
- G: Willie, you mentioned Ted Williams [Hall of Fame baseball player]. Many say that he was the best batter in modern times, so far as knowing the techniques of batting. Would you agree with that estimate? And did you ever have a chance to talk with him about batting?
- S: Ted and I are very good friends. In my opinion, he is the E.F. Hutton of baseball. When he talks, everybody wants to listen. He has a science [for hitting], and hitting is indeed a science.
- P: The great legend about him is that he could read [William] Harridge’s [president

of the American League, 1931-1958] name on a baseball as it came in.

- S: I tell you what, I would not question it. If he said he could do it, I would believe [him] because of the success that he had. He is really one of the few men in the hundred years that baseball has been in existence who had success hitting a baseball 60 percent of the time. If I am successful say in 10,000 plate appearances, I am going to get 3,000 hits and make 7,000 outs, whether it be by striking out, grounding out, or popping out. However, Ted Williams did not do that. I think the next active player who can hit like that is Rod Carew who may be on a 3.6 percent average. But Ted Williams, without a doubt, [was one of the all-time great hitters]. He has a book out, *The Science of Hitting*, which I have read many, many times; and it is like reading the Bible. Each time you read it you get a completely different version of what he is saying, and then you can implement these things [into your own hitting style]. And surely, these things [that Ted Williams talks about] do exist. They are documented.
- P: How much of a science is it? Could somebody step up [to the plate] with just an absolute natural [ability and be a very successful hitter]? You would think that hitting a ball would be the most natural thing in the world. Have there been hitters who have never had to read a book called *The Science of Hitting* to hit .390 or .400?
- S: What I believe in first of all, and I am no one to be a complete judge of anything, is that if you take a good athlete and put a baseball bat in his hand and put him around good athletes that know the game of baseball that particular person will become a great baseball player just by his natural ability to adjust and do various things. It would be the same thing if you were to put a football, basketball, a tennis racquet, or a golf club in his hand. Good athletes can do just about anything.
- G: So that if [John] Elway [an NFL quarterback] had decided not to go with the Denver [Broncos] football team, he possibly could have had a great career in baseball?
- S: From what I was told, I doubt it. I have not seen Elway play, but I understand he did not have what you look for in bat speed.
- G: So [his athletic ability] did not transfer well in his case?
- S: No, it did not. But when I say a good athlete I mean a kid who at the high school level played virtually all three major sports and did very well [in each of them]. But it is that little intangible thing that comes from the heart, that comes from where your soul really lies, [that separates the good athletes from the great ones].

- G: I have always wanted to ask somebody like you this question, Willie. As I recall, in high school the best player on the team usually was the [best] pitcher and the best hitter. He was the best all-around athlete. Yet as players moved into semi-professional baseball or professional baseball, the pitchers became so specialized in pitching that it appeared that they had neglected their batting game because pitchers are not noted for their prowess at the plate. What happened along the way? If a pitcher is still such a fine athlete, could he not have maintained his ability as a hitter?
- S: For a person to be a good pitcher, he has to devote so much of his time, effort, and mental concentration to pitching that he really does not have the time to do what it takes to consistently be a good hitter. If I had to teach hitting today, I would have the person learn how to hit line drives all over the ball field. Then if they have that God-given talent to be able on occasion to drive the ball for a considerable amount of distance, then I would have him work on that too. But [hitting] is an eight hour job, mentally and physically. You just never stop hitting or becoming a student of it.
- G: George, you said that baseball was your favorite sport or at least you thought of baseball as the greatest of all the American sports. Why did you not don a baseball uniform, or perhaps you did and I did not read that book?
- P: I did. I wrote a book called *Out of My League* in which I pitched to Richie Ashburn [outfielder, 1948-1962] and Willie Mays [hall of fame baseball player] in Yankee Stadium in an All-Star game. I got Willie Mays out on a pop up. He popped out by those monuments. [laughter] It was a very long pop up.
- G: You wrote a book called *Shadow Box*. Did you get in the ring?
- P: The book was really about Muhammad Ali [professional boxer; heavy weight champion of the world] who was, I think, indeed the sort of great titanic sports hero of our decades. But there is a chapter in there about me getting in the ring with Archie Moore, who was the light heavyweight champion of the world. It was another fiasco on my part. [laughter] Do not get into the ring with him or with anybody for that matter.
- G: And then you wrote *One More July*. What was the theme of that particular book?
- P: *One More July* is a book with **Bill Curry**, who is the [football] coach of (if I can whisper the word) Georgia Tech and was a great center with the Green Bay Packers and then with Baltimore. He was one of the most articulate, interesting men out of his sport. He was one of the very few sports figures I have known who really took an interest in his constituency. He would go and sit with different

people at the team dinners and so forth, whereas people tend to get into their cliques and sort of settle in there. He would have been a very good journalist. So I did a book with him about his football career, which was spent with a lot of [different] clubs. As I say, he carried around this extraordinary journalistic curiosity. I think it is a better book about football than *Paper Lion*.

G: *Paper Lion* is the book for which you became best known for a long period of time. Of late, people have noticed you prominently on television, promoting a particular product. Do you play video games yourself?

P: I did. I have two children. One is six and the other is twelve, and they love those games. So occasionally they sucker me into them and wallop me at them. I think a lot of people are worried about the impact of such games, but I think, like anything taken in moderation, they can be a very interesting adjunct to education and to entertainment. When I was down in Miami the other day, all the Miami Dolphins, when they were not on the practice field, were sitting there playing Intelelevision football. You would think they would be sick of the game, but they are not. They sit there and play themselves in miniature on the screens. It is the darn'dest sight to see a 280 pounder intensely upset at losing a couple of yards on the video screen.

G: We may have Intelelevision national championships as that develops.

P: Some of those games do have championships. I went and gave out prizes at an Intelelevision game championship in Pittsburgh. Hundreds of people competed all over the country in that tournament. They had to play five different games; there was tremendous competition.

G: One quick question here about fireworks. How did you get into that, and why are you the fireworks commissioner for New York?

P: I invented that; there is no such thing as the fireworks commissioner. But I did go to the Mayor [of New York] once because he wanted me to become a commissioner of something else, but I could not do it, so we invented this bogus commissionership. I think fireworks is the eighth art. I cannot think of anything which gives us such visual splendor as an enormous fireworks show. And indeed in the past it was considered one of the arts. It is very much like music, except it is a symphonic effect on the eye rather than the ear. I got interested, because I always thought the Fourth of July was the best day of the year. It is in the summertime, which is the best time of the year, and you are on vacation. It is a very long day, or used to be with fireworks. Now you cannot buy them in New York, but you used to be able to. When I was growing up, the day would start at 6:00 am with a cherry bomb which would scare the family cat. Then it would go on through the evening. You would have the fireworks show on the river or the

lake. So it was a long day. It was somehow better than Christmas. The weather was better, and there were no disappointing presents. You had this wonderful paper bag full of these things. There was always a little bit of _____ danger involved. Then in the army I was a demolition expert, which for some reason was absurd, so I have always had an interest in things that go up and make loud noises and affect changes in the sky. Also I have never met a writer who was not fascinated by fireworks, because writing is so difficult -- you sit down at a typewriter and it never comes out the way you want it to. But you touch a flare to a big aerial shell, and it goes up and does everything that you want to do as a writer – people go, wow, and they are impressed.

G: It is a great paragraph.

P: It is a great paragraph, and also you can reach many more people. There were about a million or two million people who came to see the Brooklyn Bridge show. When you finish that, you have a sense that you have done something like hitting a home run I suppose.

G: Willie, you are trying to hit some home runs now as a member of the Presidents Advisory Board for Sickle Cell Anemia. How close are we getting to a good treatment or a cure?

S: I do not bear good news. The federal funds have cut back in a lot of areas, including sickle cell anemia. To give you an idea, it is being put under an umbrella with other genetic-orientated diseases and there is roughly about 200 of them. There is a fixed income in terms of how that money is distributed among all these 201, now that sickle cell is there, diseases. Sickle cell at one time had roughly \$19 million that was allotted for the United States and the people who were religiously trying to do things about it. Right now the state of Pennsylvania could use right around \$10 million. The upside of that would be that the communities are taking a real first hand look at this and saying, let us collectively do something about the local treatments that we need to have done in respect to sickle cell anemia. That is the good side of it. Hopefully, if they see these kinds of things being done on a community level, the federal government will indeed come back and allocate more money so that they can continue this as they did in polio. There are people religiously working around the clock on sickle cell who will hopefully come up with something in terms of a major breakthrough.

G: I hope that that happens. I want to thank both of you for being with me on *Conversation* – Willie Stargell and George Plimpton. I want to mention that you are brought to our campus by Accent, which is the speakers office of student government. I appreciate very much your taking time out to join me on *Conversation*. I wish you all the best – Willie in your new careers, and George in your exotic careers, and hope that we have you back again sometime soon.

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S: Thank you very much.

P: Exotic dancing. That would be interesting to do.

G: It would. [laughter]

S: Go for it.

[End of the interview]