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Interview with Bud Selig by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Allan 'Bud' H. Selig

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Allan H. “Bud” Selig
(Interviewer: *Andrea L’Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 220
June 24, 2010

Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. The date is June 24, 2010, this is Andrea L’Hommedieu, and today I am in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, interviewing [Major League Baseball] Commissioner Allan H. “Bud” Selig at his office at 777 East Wisconsin Avenue. And Commissioner Selig, could you start just by giving me your date and place of birth?

Bud Selig: Was born July 30, 1934, here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

AL: And did you grow up in this area?

BS: I did, I was born and raised here.

AL: I was reading a little bit about your upbringing, you seem very connected to this area, throughout your life.

BS: I am very connected. My father was in business here, and we lived here all our lives, and I went to high school here and went to college at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, which is just ninety miles west of here of course, and then lived here ever since. And even though as the commissioner now I travel a lot and I have an office in New York, I’ve chosen to also have our main office here in Milwaukee.

AL: And I was reading that your love of baseball was influenced to a large degree by your mother’s interest in baseball.

BS: That’s absolutely true.

AL: I’m fascinated by that.

BS: Yes, my mother was a school teacher, and she was really a remarkable woman in so many ways. But I can still remember when I was really young, four, five, six, seven, my mother listened to baseball games on the radio, and as a result I started doing that, and my mother would take me to a lot of games. Later in life, when at a young age I became president of the Milwaukee Brewers and we got a major league team, and for many, many years my mother never missed a game, a home game. I mean *never* missed a game, and she was a great fan. So there’s no doubt. And my father liked baseball, but he liked it more when I think that he and I

would go to Chicago to a game together, we could spend time, it was a way of bonding, but it was my mother who really got me interested in baseball.

AL: And so I'm interested to know how you became so [entrepreneurial] in terms of getting really involved as an owner at a young age.

BS: Well it's an interesting, long, rather complicated story. The Braves tried to leave Milwaukee at the end of the 1964 season for Atlanta, which of course provoked great outrage here and all over the country. They did move at the end of the 1965 season, but because it was so unpleasant they couldn't really run the team their last year here. And we had a civic group [and] I wound up as the head of the civic group at a very young age, with all the civic leaders in Milwaukee and in Wisconsin forming an organization called Teams, Inc. I guess maybe because I was willing to do the work or whatever, I became sort of the central figure, and then the president of the Milwaukee Brewers, even before we had a team. And it was a great experience for me, it started when I was twenty-nine years old, so I was really a very young age.

And I later brought an exhibition game, the Chicago White Sox and the Minnesota Twins, here, and then I brought the Chicago White Sox up in 1968 and '69 for ten games a year, which was very historic. And fortunately, on March 31, 1970, we finally got a team, we got the Seattle Pilots, and there were five-and-a-half years of a lot of disappointment, but in the end well worth it. And so as a result today, the Milwaukee Brewers are here because I brought them here, and kept them here, and got a ballpark built.

AL: And they won the World Series in '82?

BS: No, they played in the World Series, we lost in seven games because our great relief pitcher Rollie Fingers was hurt, so I'm still mad about it and it's twenty-eight years later, but they were a wonderful team. We had great teams back in the late '70s, early, mid-'80s, even late '80s, they were very, very good. We had two Hall of Fame players, Paul Molitor and Robin Yount, so they were awfully good.

AL: And at what point in your love of baseball and your career did you intersect with George Mitchell?

BS: Well, it's interesting, the most fascinating part of my career has been, I always say to people it's been all the people I've met. And the Senator was the majority leader in that time, and we had a mutual friend who said, "Gee, you ought to meet George Mitchell." And I said, "Well I'd like to." And we did. We struck up a friendship, and then he left the Senate and went on to other things, but we maintained a very close relationship and talked a lot. And then when the Red Sox were being sold, I thought that George Mitchell, he was such a great statesman and had so much maturity, and I know how much he loved the Red Sox, and so I sort of was involved in getting him in a relationship there.

And then, through watching him work over the years, and knowing the profound respect that so

many people had for him, and have for him, in 200-, I guess it was '07, it was either 2006 or '07 – I guess it was 2006 now that I think about it – we had had the steroid crisis. We were already on a great track, we had the toughest program in sports, but we were under some fire in Washington, I thought unfairly so, but that was irrelevant. And I finally said to myself, with no support from any group, either my own office or any other, 'I need to bring in somebody from the outside to really examine the history of this thing. I mean, I have no secrets.' So I thought for a couple of weeks, who would it be? He had to be somebody, he or she, statesman, also have a great working knowledge of baseball, because if you bring in somebody with no knowledge of it that would have taken a long educational process.

And so it's the first time in American sports history that any sport had brought an outsider in to examine the sport. And as I said, it was internally unpopular, very unpopular with the union, very unpopular with – just my thought that I was going to do it. And I had a bunch of wonderful names, but I kept coming back to George Mitchell. And people have asked, well why did you keep coming back to George Mitchell? There were only two slight negatives: one, he did have a relationship with the Boston Red Sox, but that was easy enough to move around; and two, he was a friend of mine, and he suffers, poor fellow, as a friend of mine, and people will question that. But outside of that, when I looked at all the names on the list, the evidence was overwhelming. He knew baseball, he was impeccable in terms of integrity, reputation, I mean impeccable. He was a great statesman, had been in Ireland, had done all these things, and I kept saying to myself, for the slight little negatives, this is a man to do it.

And so this is one of those rare times in life and the retrospect of history, you know, what I can say to you? Boy, was it the right decision. And today, nobody quarrels with it. And George was George Mitchell, he did a brilliant job, he was thorough, very smart, great relationship with a lot of the parties. The union refused to cooperate, but they could never really rip the Senator, they just refused to cooperate with him. And today we have the toughest testing program in American sports; we adopted all of his suggestions, or nineteen or twenty of them. But my great respect, my profound respect for him is even greater after that experience than it was before, and I didn't think that was possible. And I really mean that. He handled himself just beautifully in every way, and so today we stand as a symbol to a lot of people as a sport that really leads now in dealing with performance enhancing drugs. And there are a lot of reasons for it, but one of the primary ones is the work that Senator Mitchell did in that report.

AL: More long term goals, rather than immediate punishments or that sort of thing.

BS: Right, he was very - Exactly right. And George, what I wanted to know was, a) you like to learn. And I said this to him right from the beginning. After all, I'm a history major and a history buff, and people who don't learn from history generally pay a price for it. And so I said, while I thought we had learned our lessons, I wanted somebody to come in, make suggestions as a result of what had happened, not be afraid to be critical of anybody; and he, I think, conducted nineteen hundred or two thousand interviews, everybody in baseball cooperated beautifully. And so I was very proud of that. He made interesting suggestions, and he made practical ones, as well as a thorough examination, as I said, with the union stiffing him, to use a

proper term there. And so today everybody pats us on the back; we banned amphetamines, we're trying to find a test for human growth hormone. But when I look at the whole history, I can say we're the only sport that brought an outsider in, and look who we brought in, and look at the job he did.

AL: And besides the testing, it's also, it seems to be a change in culture.

BS: Oh, there's a huge change in the culture, there's a huge change. We banned amphetamines, which we weren't even asked to do. There's no question people are now complaining that pitchers have taken over because they think the bans have worked so well, but that's okay, that's good. So what I would say to you is that, I'm really proud of where we are. The union fought it. We had a cocaine problem in the '80s and they couldn't get a drug test improvement. We had even four players that went to jail, twenty-nine players got jailed – and they fought it. And I know they were unhappy about Senator Mitchell's report, but it turns out they couldn't be too unhappy. It was very factual, very well done, and it really showed that we cared.

So today we not only have the toughest testing program in sports, we've adopted many internal controls in the clubhouses and in front offices, and everybody in baseball has to take a drug [test], all this was at Senator Mitchell's suggestions. And we now today lead, we spend more money on advertising and public service on steroids I think than any other entity, including the federal government. For all their crying and complaining, they haven't done anything. But the link in there is always that we did everything, and we weren't afraid to have somebody come in and look at our program. And so today we're no longer under pressure and shouldn't be, but we are very zealous in our protection of the sport, to make sure that we don't misfire again.

AL: So you've known George Mitchell personally and become friends.

BS: It's a long time now, I guess it's twenty-some years, twenty-three, twenty-four – long time.

AL: Did the two of you ever get to go to baseball games together, was that ever anything that you did?

BS: We have gone. I have to think back, that's a very good question. I think – we talk baseball all the time, when we talk.

AL: What sort of things do you talk about?

BS: Oh, I like to kid him about the Red Sox. If the Red Sox are doing well, I'll kid him, and if they're doing badly I'll kid him, but we talk about baseball and trends and so on. He's very knowledgeable; he's just a great fan. And I want to emphasize again, as nice a human being as he is, that's how smart he is, oh, he's very smart. And so yes, we talk a lot about baseball and about, we're both fans. He grew up loving the Red Sox, and I grew up as a fan out in the

Midwest, so you've got a New Englander and a Midwesterner, which is a great part about baseball. But yes, we do talk a lot of baseball. It's interesting because it happens, oftentimes I want to talk politics with him and other things, and he wants to talk to me about baseball. He generally prevails, I'll say that. Yes, because I'm a political buff too.

AL: So that must have sort of bonded you with the friendship, having both politics and baseball.

BS: Absolutely, no question about it.

AL: I notice that there are awards and such and memorabilia about the Jewish community involved in baseball, and you grew up as part of the Jewish community in Milwaukee.

BS: I did, absolutely, I did.

AL: Can you talk about that a little bit, about being Jewish in Milwaukee?

BS: Well, actually I grew up, my closest friend here was Herb [Herbert H.] Kohl, who was a senator, of course, and who owns the Milwaukee Bucks and who Mitchell knows very well. He and I went to grade school together, junior high school, high school, we were college roommates and fraternity brothers, and our fathers were friends. And yes, I did grow up in a Jewish community, and we lived on the west side of Milwaukee and it was a very vibrant community, and I've always been part of that. As well as part of the general community here, too.

AL: And when you think about the times you've spent with George Mitchell and known him over the years, are there any stories or recollections that stand out in your mind?

BS: Well, I remember when he was in Ireland I talked to him a lot, and we were at his wedding actually, when he got married in 1994, if my memory serves me correctly, Sue and I, in New York. And he would call me a lot while the Red Sox sale was going on, there was a lot of controversy, there was a lot of nastiness, a lot of people vying to own the Red Sox of course, why not.

I don't know, we've just had a very warm and – I remember one time we met, and my wife's a tennis buff and of course George is, and so by accident we were there with the owner of the Houston [Astros] club, Drayton McLane and his wife, at the U.S. Open, actually a few days before 9/11, now that I think about it. And we bumped into him and I think we all went and had dinner together, and had the nicest time, I was so happy to see him. And of course we talked a lot of tennis, but he wanted to talk baseball, every time we were alone he'd switch the subject to baseball.

You know, I called him, I hadn't heard from him. I know he has a tough job today, and I kidded him way back when he took this [assignment as Special Envoy to the Middle East] I said, "You think investigating steroids was a problem, now you really got a problem, now you got two

intransigent sides.” At least with me, we weren’t intransigent and the union might have been. Those are the kind of conversations we had, and he’ll tell me about what he’s doing, and I’ll tell him what’s going on in baseball.

AL: When you think about George Mitchell and the qualities he brought to the steroids investigation, and to all the other pieces in his career, what are some of the personal characteristics that [you’ve observed]?

BS: Well, that’s interesting, because it’s a thing, he’s a man of, you can’t say this about too many people in this day and age, the world’s a very critical place today. First of all, as I said before and I’d say this to you again, he’s a man of unquestioned integrity. He has remarkable integrity. And he’s smart, I’m impressed that he knew the baseball culture as well as he did, and he’s a man who inspires confidence. And there are not a lot of people that inspire confidence the way he does; he inspires confidence. I just can’t tell you how, yes, you can tell, I have enormous respect for George. And as much respect as I have, that’s how much I like him, too. And so I am, if I had another tough job today, (I know he has one so he’s now [busy]), but I really mean this: if something happened in baseball that affected our integrity – and fortunately things are very good now and really smooth sailing in the last five or six years – the first person I’d turn to is George Mitchell. Because even if he couldn’t [take it on], he’d give me good advice, and that’s what I think of George Mitchell. I have respect for a lot of people, but I can’t tell you there’s anybody that I have any more respect or affection for than Senator Mitchell.

AL: I’ve asked most of the questions that I had. I guess, if you were looking at his career, from a career standpoint, and you’ve seen what he’s done over the years, what do you think is going to be some of the lasting accomplishments?

BS: Well I think the first thing you can say about him – (I always, I have a line that I use around people, sometimes facetiously, and I always use the name George Mitchell. Now when I’m describing ball players sometimes, I make a little comment that’s a little sarcastic.)

George Mitchell, the greatest statesman of our generation, that’s what I would say about George Mitchell. There’s no question in my mind. I can understand why people turn to George Mitchell immediately, because he has all the characteristics that you would want. I meant before, when I talking about the list of names, they were very, very impressive names, when I was thinking about [who should lead the steroid investigation] – but the thing I kept saying to myself, this is baseball, America’s pastime, profoundly affects millions and millions of people, I need somebody that I have the utmost confidence in, who won’t use this as a political sounding board, and so on and so forth. I didn’t have a scintilla of doubt about that; George Mitchell’s integrity is [unquestionable].

So, he’s the greatest statesman of our generation, clearly, I think that he’s earned [that], and he was a terrific Senate majority leader. It’s interesting, the political things, while people would say, “Well, he was a very partisan Democrat” – and he should be if he’s Senate majority leader. He and Bob Dole got along well, and nobody since then has gotten along like he and Bob Dole

did, and as a result we've had partisanship in Washington that has been unhealthy. If George Mitchell was still there, I'm confident that wouldn't be going on. So we get back to the statesman thing, I think that's the thing that I would key on most. And there isn't a doubt, as I said, that he is the greatest statesman of our generation. I can't even think of anybody who'd be second right now, I mean close.

AL: Now, you said you had political interests. Did you ever try to run for an office yourself?

BS: No, I never did, and Herb Kohl always kids me about that, and a lot of people do I think, including the Senator. No, I really didn't. When I left school I wanted to be a history professor, and in fact I've been teaching now a little bit myself, in the last year, at both Marquette University and the University of Wisconsin. And when I was younger I had a lot of people talk to me about it, but no, I was in business, and then once I got into baseball, baseball was really my love. And so as much as I like politics, and as much as I really respect people like George who put public service ahead of themselves, my public service was baseball actually, and so I didn't [pursue politics]. But yes, I thought a lot about it, and I have a lot of political heroes, some of them I'm sure are George's. I believed when I left the University of Wisconsin in June of 1956 that I was coming back as a history professor, but my father talked me out of it for at least a year, and the rest is history.

AL: Do you have any final thoughts, or something that I haven't asked that you think is important to add?

BS: Well, let me think, I'm trying to think. I've known him so long. I don't think so. He's just a great human being, I don't know how else to say it. He's a great human being, and I really, you can tell I have just profound respect for him in every way. And I'd say this to you, in the twenty-three or -four years, whatever it is that I've known him, he's never once disappointed me in any of those areas. He's just that good; I mean he's just that good. And straightforward, I like people like that. One thing about him, you always know where you stand. And for him to go to Ireland and do what he's done, and other places, and I know now he has a virtually impossible task but if anybody can do it, George Mitchell can do it. So when Barack Obama appointed him I thought to myself, well, being George, and having witnessed all the turmoil in the Middle East all these years, all the heartbreak and all the anger and hatred, but if anybody can at least try to bring peace there, it's George Mitchell.

AL: Thank you so much.

BS: Thank you, I enjoyed it.

End of Interview