

As a 29 year old journeyman MLB pitcher, arriving at the ball park, finding your bags packed for you and being waved to the manager's office is extremely forbidding. Ten minutes later with the dreaded pick slip in my hand I faced the morning humidity that foretold of a day filled with frantic phone calls and nervous energy. First call, a stike right down the middle. "Hey Charlie, this is Skip. Hey, Skippy, haven spoken to you in a while how are things going?" A pause and an attempt to sound upbeat while depicting my present dilemma. "Hey listen to me; can you still bring the heat?" Assuring him with more conviction than I felt, he ordered me to: "Stay right were you are and I'll get back to you within the hour". "Thanks Charlie." 40 minutes late the phone sprang to life as did my heart and my career. "Listen to me, do exactly what I tell you to do and I will resign you to the A's organization. You'll have to report to my AAA team. The rest will be up to you. I give you my word that if you pitch well you'll be back in the Bigs before the All Star Break. I'm sending you a plane ticker to Phoenix, a driver will pick you up at the airport. Lie low. Don't discuss your plans with anyone."

Skip Lockwood

Baseball is a great game grounded in facts and immortalized by folklore. Charlie O. Finley fashioned innovations in baseball that enhanced a fan-friendly, young-at-heart atmosphere which permeated throughout the ballpark and enlivened the fans. Be it a traveling mule, a greased pig contest, pigeons in the umpire's ball stash, or multi-colored uniforms donned by mustachioed ballplayers, Charlie Finley wanted the fans to come out to the ballpark and thoroughly enjoy the experience. I never had the privilege to meet Charlie in person, but will be forever grateful for his generosity and guidance during an early morning phone conversation we shared in Phoenix.

Kathleen Lockwood

The following excerpt is taken from Major League Bride: An Inside look at Life Outside the Ballpark by Kathleen Lockwood (McFarland & Co., Publishers, Jefferson, NC, 2010).

Traded to the New York Yankees from the California Angels
Attended the National Prayer Breakfast at The White House in Washington, D.C.
Reported to Spring Training in Fort Lauderdale, FL
Released by the Yankees the last week of camp
Acquired by Charlie Finley and the Oakland Athletics organization
Sequestered for a week in a Phoenix, AZ motel
Assigned to the Tucson Toros (AAA), Tucson, Arizona
Sold to the New York Mets
Assigned to the Tidewater Mets (AAA), Tidewater, Virginia
Brought up to the New York Mets

Skip's parting request to be traded from the California Angels was granted soon after the season ended. We were thrilled when we learned (by a local sports reporter) that Skip would be donning the pin stripes of the New York Yankees during the upcoming season. The anticipation of moving to New York was the focus of our dinner discussions all winter. The Yankees were in desperate need of starting pitchers and Skip would get to play on a team that had a solid defense and could score runs. His six year military obligation had finally been completed and would no longer interfere with his baseball career. I was delighted with the prospect of living back on the East coast where I could visit my family during long road trips. Life was back to being a great adventure.

On an emotional high after dining at the White House, we arrived in Florida eager to begin a new season with a new team. Optimism, talent and energy ruled. Could life get any better? The answered

appeared to be “of course” when Skip was reunited with his 1965 Kansas City Athletics roommate Catfish Hunter. Unforeseen circumstances, including terrible eyesight, night games under bad lighting and losing a season to active duty in the National Guard had stalled Skip’s career. In 1968, Charlie Finley changed Skip from a power hitting third baseman to a power throwing pitcher and now Skip was back on track. While Skip had struggled, Catfish’s career had catapulted on its future Hall of Fame track.

The Yankee pitching staff had undergone a major overhaul over the winter. At the time Skip was traded to the Yankees to augment their starting pitching staff, Catfish was the property of the Oakland Athletics and had just won the American League Cy Young Award. In a bizarre set of events, Insurance mogul Charlie Finley neglected to pay the \$50,000 insurance premium that constituted half of Catfish’s salary. Benefiting from the players’ new legal options obtained by Curt Flood’s sacrifice, Catfish brought his case to the recently instituted arbitration court. The court ruled that Charlie Finley had breached the contract and thereby nullified the reserve clause that bound Catfish to the A’s. Catfish was declared the first modern day free agent and received over \$3.5 million dollars from George Steinbrenner to sign with the Yankees on New Year’s Eve, 1974. Unbeknownst to us at the time, Skip’s hopes of a future with the Yankees ended with his friend’s good fortune...

Skip had finally gotten a chance to “show his stuff” for the past week and had had three good outings in a row; he had just pitched four innings of no hit ball and we were relieved that he would definitely now make the team. The false hopes of last year’s California dreaming were slowly fading away, here was a new team in a new town with a new opportunity to shine, another great adventure was about to begin and we were ready, willing and able to take on Manhattan.

You cannot imagine our shock when Skip received a call the next morning informing him that the Yankees had decided to release him. Not sold, not traded, but released. This was unbelievable. The timing could not be worse. With only a few days left before the season began it would be almost impossible to sign on with another team. A coach confided that the Yankees had not anticipated Skip would pitch so well and had planned to let him pitch himself out of a job at the end of training. Perplexed by his success, there was still no room for him on the roster and the decision to cut him and his meager salary stood. We spent the morning staring at the phone while disbelief, shock and anger took hold. How could this be happening? Skip was only 29 and had been playing professional baseball for twelve years. His “great potential” was finally coming to fruition. His career could not possibly be over before it began. What were we going to do and where were we going to live?

A mid-day phone call from Charlie Finley answered all those questions. Charlie O. Finley had signed Skip directly out of high school and had always related to Skip more as a benefactor and friend than as a boss. Mr. Finley asked only one question of Skip: “Be honest with me, son, can you still pitch?” When Skip replied with an unequivocal yes, Charlie assumed full control. The Yankees had neglected to place Skip on waivers, as required, and were in violation of the basic agreement. Mr. Finley was furious with George Steinbrenner for luring Catfish Hunter to the Yankees and told Skip that, with his help, Charlie could reap a substantial fine from George for this omission.

In a cloak and dagger move, Skip was instructed to fly directly to Phoenix, Arizona and hide in a designated hotel for a week until the waiver period cleared. He was instructed to “lay low, order all meals in and not talk to anyone for the week.” The wearing of a raincoat, sunglasses and a fake mustache was suggested, but we assumed this was in jest. At the end of the week Charlie promised to sign Skip with the Oakland organization and pay him his major league salary. He could not assure him a spot on the Oakland roster at that time because they had just finalized their own pitching staff, but Charlie promised that he would not let Skip flounder in the minors and would sell him to a contender if the Athletics did not require his services. Skip’s first inclination was to say goodbye to baseball and just go home. After attending college part time during the off season, he had finally graduated. Maybe

it was time to hang up the cleats and join the real world? While I could understand the frustration he was feeling I also knew my husband was not ready to leave baseball. Too much effort had been spent over the winter to give up now. We were still young and had years ahead of us before we really needed to grow up. I would go visit my parents for a week and he could play super spy and hibernate in Phoenix during the same period. I would then fly to meet him wherever our next adventure would take us. Enthusiasm can be contagious and my Pollyanna persona softened the blow. He called Charlie Finley back and accepted his offer. An hour later we headed for the airport, flying off in different directions, yet united with a common bond...

I had not known Skip in high school when he was one of the top prospects in the country and the center of the media's attention. During our five years in baseball Skip was a good team player on some very bad teams. All of a sudden Skip's fastball was the topic of the day in Tucson. Forget a shaky economy, forget the mounting tension in Lebanon, forget racial tensions and border disputes, the question of the day on Tucson's talk radio show was how fast was Skip's fastball? Night after night he would strike out batter after batter. While I couldn't help to be caught up in all the enthusiasm a small part of me was afraid that this newfound success might some night leave as quickly as it had arrived. 10 saves in two weeks was incredible. But the fact that the majority of the outs came on strikeouts was unbelievable. Power pitching was beating power hitting and the fans loved it. The team was going to Phoenix for the weekend I went along to enjoy the ride.

Only a few months ago Skip was hiding out in a hotel in Phoenix after being released from the Yankees. It seemed like an eternity ago. Returning to Phoenix with a resurrected fastball was exhilarating. After striking out the side and racking up another save the first night back in Phoenix we ordered a pizza and sat out on the deck of the hotel room with a pitcher of Black Russians. Soon, very soon, we would return to the big leagues. One huge obstacle did exist, however, and that would be the continued success in Oakland of another of Skip's old roommates, Rollie Fingers. Rollie was having another great year in the bullpen and it would be almost impossible to take his place as the #1 reliever. Would Charlie Finley keep his promise and trade Skip? By his third drink Skip was potently positive that Charlie was an honorable man and would honor his pledge.

We were startled by the ringing of the telephone in our Phoenix hotel room at 7:30 am Pacific Coast Time. I answered it in somewhat of a fog and was not prepared to hear Charlie Finley on the other end of the line. Try as I might I could not wake Skip out of his deep sleep to speak to Charlie, so I mustered up my courage and began to negotiate for our future. Mr. Finley said he had been following Skip's success for the past few weeks and had been hearing rave reviews from his scouting department. He was apologetic at not being able to offer Skip a spot in Oakland's bullpen, but acknowledged the promise he had made in April and told me he was happy to give Skip the opportunity to return to "the show". Protecting his own organization, he would only sell Skip's contract to a National League team. The Chicago Cubs, the New York Mets and the Philadelphia Phillies all were interested. He was asking my advice on where we might like to go! While I was pretty knowledgeable about the pitching staffs on many American League teams my insight was negligible on anything to do with the National League. I needed more information before making such an important decision. I asked Charlie for his suggestion as to what team was most in need of a closer. He advised me that Wrigley Field was a tough ballpark to pitch in and that the Phillies had recently acquired Tug McGraw. The New York Mets had great starting pitching, but could really use help in the bullpen. While it seemed like a no brainer to me, I felt that Skip really should make the final call. I pleaded for a little time to make such an important decision. Charlie said sure, we could get back to him anytime within the next hour. Deals don't stay on the table long in baseball.

I hung up the phone, put on a pot of coffee, and grabbed the Excedrin and a large glass of water. Be-

ing a sports agent had not been part of my job description. Despite the feeling that the Russian army was marching through his head, Skip woke up. A monumental decision had to be made in a moment's time. Analyzing our options we concluded that his best shot would be with the New York Metropolitan Baseball Club. The irony was not lost on us that we had started off the spring expecting to play in Shea Stadium for the New York Yankees and we were now electing to play for the New York Mets in Shea Stadium. Well before the allotted time expired Skip returned Charlie Finley's call. Thanking him for giving us both a chance and a choice, Skip conveyed our decision to join the New York Mets. Looking back I can safely say that it was one of the best decisions we have ever made in the shortest amount of time.