Ed Kranepool 18 years a Met speaks of the Golden Age of baseball
By Marc Gold

I spoke with Ed Kranepool at length about his days with the Mets, the people he played with and against, and the state of baseball in general.

Marc: How are you feeling?

Ed: It’s two years now, all is fine no side effects, Dr. Frank S. Darras was great at Stony Brook. They’ve taken good care of me. I’m feeling great. It’s a good year for me.

M: What’s it like all of a sudden being 76?

E: You don’t know the difference as long as you’re feeling good. Before my new kidney I was struggling to walk 20 feet. Now I do what I want, no restrictions.

M: What was highlight of your career.

E: It would have to be the 1969 World Series no question about it. If you sign a contract you want to be in the World Series, you want to win something. To me it was seven years of frustration. We lost over 100 games for 7 years. It’s never fun losing. The writers have nothing good to write about. Constant negative publicity surrounding the ball club and ball players. So, if you have a good day you’re never going to read about it. You are going to read about something that’s negative because you lose. So, when you finally win there’s a reason to go to the ballpark. We never had a reason to play during the second half of the season. We were always eliminated by the All-Star break. In 1969 we were able to go to the ballpark with a smile on our face.

It was something to look forward to at the end of the tunnel. We played great, won 100 ballgames, went to the playoffs, beat the Braves three times then went on defeat Baltimore in five games and win the World Series.

M: Aside from ’69, what was a highlight?

E: Well In ’73 we came back in the last six weeks of the season. We played well. It was the same familiar situation for us as we had to win every game we played. Then we were in the playoffs. We were underdogs against Cincinnati and people didn’t expect us to beat the Big Red Machine. But we did! Our pitching was outstanding and we scored enough runs to win. Unfortunately, we lost a World Series that we should have won. It was the most frustrating
time in my career. We were up 3 to 2 going into Oakland with Seaver lined up to pitch game seven, if necessary.

We had the A’s where we wanted them, but Yogi played his cards wrong. We lost game six by using Seaver too early, and we lost the seventh because we were down and out. We didn’t have to use Tom in the sixth game. Yogi did not figure that out. George Stone should have pitched game six. Stone was 12 and 3. There is no question about it, he had won a few games in a row and Seaver should have been saved for game 7, and then you have the whole pitching staff backing him up if need be.

M: The highlight of course were the two World Series, but what about your beginnings 1962, ’63, ’64, when you had those great hot streaks... What about the 1965 All-Star game?

E: Making the All-Star game when you’re 20 years of age is a great individual accomplishment. Sure, it’s a highlight, but the real highlight is the World Series because not anyone gets in there. An individual can make an All-Star game but it takes a team to win the World Series. I had highlights but we had more downs than ups because the ballclub was bad and one player is not good enough to bring a pennant to a team.

You’ve got to surround yourself with good players. In ’69 we all produced during the course of the year. That’s why we were so good. 25 guys contributed. We swept past Chicago who ran out of gas. We had to beat them and we did sweeping series after series against them. We beat the teams we had to and that’s how you win the pennant. You can’t back into it. We had to keep going, plugging away. There were good teams in the league. We kept performing. The same thing with Atlanta. They had the best team in baseball. We outscored the best offensive club in the playoffs while their pitching fell asleep. Then of course came the World Series. Our righty platoon starred in the WS. Not everybody liked platooning but we accepted it. Gil was a great manager and he convinced us that it was in the best interest of the ball club.

M: Were you ever nervous when you came up to the plate?

E: I guess early in the season you might have some butterflies. Every season is the same, you’ve been off for six months so now you’re getting back into the groove.

M: Who was the toughest pitcher you ever faced.

E: For me it was Phil Niekro.

He was a knuckleballer and I couldn’t hit it. It was a 60-mph pitch that bounced up and down. That’s all he threw to me. He didn’t care if he walked me; he was going to make me hit his pitch. Over my career we played against great pitchers. Sandy Koufax was the best pitcher we faced. There was also Bob Gibson.

M: How did you do against Koufax?
E: Koufax, I got my hits, I mean he was not intimidating. He was over-the-top and had a great curveball. He was the best in baseball no question about it. He had a lot of stamina. But the guy that could change your batting was the Braves Niekro with that slow knuckler. No one could catch it, not even with the big glove.

*Ed note:* When I told Kranepool that he hit homered against Niekro on 9/14/67. Down 2-0, two out Swoboda and Tommy Davis on base. He said, “That must have been the only time he did not throw me a knuckleball.”

M: What about Marichal, Drysdale and Gibson?

E: Juan was probably the best right-hander in the league.

M: How would you compare Marichal and Gibson?

E: Marichal was more consistent than Gibson who had that one great season, revolutionizing baseball. They brought the mound down. Gibson lost 11 games that year (’68). Marichal won 20 games virtually every year. Juan’s windup was beyond spectacular. Magnificent is not the word for what he did in 1968; 30 complete games in 38 starts. The whole league doesn’t do that now, both leagues combined. You weren’t going to get him out of a game, great control, walking nobody.

M: What other great pitchers?

E: Those were the best, later on you had Carlton and Seaver who belong in the same group.

There were plenty of Hall of Famers when I played. Bob Veale and Tony Cloninger were great pitchers who are not in the Hall of Fame. They’re letting a lot of people in the Hall of Fame and it’s being watered-down. There were some great pitchers in the 60’s.

M: Were there any players that you particularly liked, any friends?

E: My closest friends were my roommates, Swoboda, McGraw. I grew up with them and we played together quite a few years. When you room with somebody you know everything about them. I mean, you spend 24 hours a day together. We spend more time together than with our wives. You’re on the road, you sleep in the same room. We travel two weeks a month three meals a day.
M: How was Torre as a manager with the Mets?

E: It was tough for him. When you’re a player and become a manager on the team it’s tough. You travel with the guys and then you have to break away a little bit.

M: Was Elroy Face one of the best relievers?
E: Yes, and the pitching coach on the Mets in 2019 was one of the best, Phil Regan.

M: You worked with some amazing talent like Mays and Snider.

E: Willie joined the team in ’72. He had an impact on the ballclub. He had so much to offer off the field. He would always talk to the players. Willie Mays was wonderful; one of the great players in San Francisco, an idol to everyone. He was the best in baseball. If he wanted to talk to you, you better listen.

M: How would you compare Willie with Mickey and the Duke?

E: Willie was the best player because he could do everything, Mickey’s career was shortened because of his legs. He couldn’t physically do the things that Willie could do. Willie was sound his whole career, never injured. Mickey had bad legs and I don’t think Snider had the ability of the other two. Duke was a good player but if you had to pick he would be the third. Mickey was number two. Willie hit more home runs and was a better fielder. I never saw Duke in his prime really. Willie had a fair arm, not great but he caught everything in the outfield. If it was in the air he was going to catch it. Was Willie better than Clemente as a fielder? It’s hard to say. Clemente had the best arm but Willie did everything so smoothly. It is difficult to say that he was not number one in everything. It was a disgrace that when he went into the Hall of Fame he was not unanimous,

M: Why do you think Gil Hodges is not in the Hall of Fame

E: People that are voting now never saw him play

They don’t know anything about Gil Hodges. They’re reading about Mike Trout and the younger players today. They don’t know the old-timers. Unless you’ve seen the player you can’t evaluate them from what you’re reading.

He was a great defensive player who was always up there with homeruns.

M: Who was the best defensive first baseman you have ever seen?
E: Might be Keith Hernandez. Wes Parker was a great fielder, Gil was a great fielder.

M: How did you feel moving from the Polo Grounds to Shea stadium in 1964?
E: The Polo grounds was a tired ballpark, but fun to play in it. Short right-field, short left field. But centerfield and right center were disaster — 420 to the gaps, 480 dead center.

M: Aside from Gil what managers did you learn from.

E: Wes Westrum and the masterful Roy McMillan. Roy would help Buddy Harrelson more than he helped me because they were both shortstops. Westrum replaced Casey and he was always looking to teach. I learned the most from Gil. In 1962 Gil helped me learn the fundamentals. He was the best first baseman around. Yogi was not a leader, a nice guy, everyone liked him...

M: How as Yogi as a strategist?

E: He was three innings behind while Gil was three innings ahead. Gil is thinking in the third about what was going to happen in the 7th. Yogi was thinking about moves he made in the third when it was the 7th, when it was too late. The horse was out of the barn. It cost you games. Even though you might like him and I did, as a friend, but I wouldn’t want him running my company.

M: Were you a teacher at all? What first basemen did you mentor?”

E: I worked with Alonso in ‘19. He is a good kid, and a listener. He is someone the ballclub can build on, a hard worker who became adequate in the field, not good, but adequate, and he will get better, and the kid can hit. They have about seven kids who can really perform. If they fill in a couple of spots, they’ll win in 2021. Alonso, McNeill, Nimmo, Conforto, Davis, DeGrom, and now Lindor. Seven guys that you can build on. They have the nucleus.

M: What is your biggest regret?

E: I made the All-Star game and a World Series. Those are the major goals a player has. I could have played longer but you don’t control your destiny. The ballclub controlled it when I played. There was no free agency.

There was no place to go. They hurt my career in the long run. I stagnated because they platooned me. Made me a pinch hitter. I was in my prime, hitting .300. They should have left me alone.

M: How did you feel when they got Clendenon in ‘69?

E: Individually you don’t like that because it limits you. Gil convinced us that as platoon players we were All-Stars combined: Clendenon/Kranepool, Shamsky/Swoboda, Boswell/ Weiss
Charles/Garrett etc. I didn’t like it and nobody did. We could have been better players if we weren’t platooned. You cannot convince me that putting a guy in who’s hitting .180 when I’m hitting .300 is a good idea. There were times I didn’t play and it was ridiculous. We didn’t always have Donn Clendenon.

M: Who should have been great?

E: Strawberry and Gooden should have been in the Hall of Fame.

M: What about Nolan Ryan as a Met?

E: Ryan never would have performed in New York as he did in California. He was always pushed back here. We didn’t think he would have the career he did. His arm was amazing, never hurt it throwing 175 pitches a game still throwing 95 MPH in the ninth, striking people out.

Gary Gentry (13 wins in ’69 plus 6.2 shutout innings in Game 3 of the World Series, including a two run double) should have been better. He had bone chip, and they didn’t know how to heal it in those days. He would have been a better pitcher.

Ryan was the odd guy out after Seaver, Koosman and Gentry.

M: What ballpark had the toughest fans?

E: Chicago had the toughest fans, the bleacher bums.

Chicago’s stands was closer to the field so you’d hear the fan. If you played the outfield you were right under them. They would throw beer on you and you’d hear them cursing your family. Cub fans were the worst, although they were true baseball fans.

In Philly they were truly rowdy. They would take the name plates off the back of the box seats and throw it on the field. You could cut up someone’s face. Look what Philly did to their own players. The ran Richie Allen out of town. No room for abusiveness by the fans. They can root but there is a line.

M: What was it like when Gil and Duke joined the Mets in ’62 and ’63?

E: I was fortunate. The smart players who came to New York liked it here and were willing to offer something to the young players. Every one of them helped me along the way. Thomas, Ashburn, Gil, Snider.
M: How was Casey Stengel?

E: Casey had a thing about young players. He tried to help us all, Harrelson, Swoboda... It was the same with the Yankees, with Billy Martin, Whitey, Mickey. He was not a theatrical clown when he would talk to you. When the press would come in he would talk about something that happened 50 years ago that made no sense.

M: Did anyone ever throw at you?

E: Of course, to intimidate you. They’ll never throw at your head. If they throw at your head, they’ll never hit you because you can see it and you can duck. If they aim for your shoulder you’ll duck and it will hit you in the head. If they throw at your shoulder that meant they’re trying to hurt you.

M: Did any pitchers do that?
E: Sure, they didn’t care.

M: Who was the meanest, who was a bad guy? Ron Hunt didn’t like Gibson..

E: Gibson would try to intimidate you and get you off the plate. That meant he respected you because you did well against him. He wouldn’t do it to a guy who wasn’t much.

We shared St. Petersburg with the Cardinals in Spring training in those days. When Tommie Agee joined the club in 1968 we told him to be careful with Gibson. Bob would always pitch opening day in Spring training. On the first pitch Gibson hit him in the head. He didn’t get over it for a year. Gibson was trying to teach him a lesson to make him worry all year. Gibson tried to intimidate you in the spring. If you put someone on base during spring training it didn’t mean anything.

Koufax and Marichal would never hit you on purpose.

M: What is your all-time All-Star team made up of players you played with or against?

E: First base probably McCovey, catcher Bench. Schmidt was probably a better third baseman than Eddie Mathews, might even take him over Brooks Robinson. There was not a better fielder than Clete Boyer.

In the outfield, Clemente, Aaron and Mays.

Shortstop was Dave Concepcion, man he could hit. (19 years with the Reds, 9 time all-star.) Second base no doubt Pete Rose.
M: Was Rose a jerk?

E: Yeah, he was over aggressive. There were times to be aggressive but he hurt people unnecessarily, Fosse in the ’70 All-Star game (Fosse was 23 at the time and his career was for the most part over three years later) and Buddy in ’73. He knocked over people when it was uncalled for. Sometime you can overdo it. Nobody will top his records, 200 hits for half of his 24 years, never complaining about playing different positions. He was the greatest competitor I ever played against.

M: ...and he never got hurt.

E: He got traded to Philadelphia when he was 38 years and hardly missed a game averaging 150 games and 180 hits for five years. Now it’s unheard of. These guys now can’t go a week without pulling a muscle. Look at Stanton and Cespedes.

Best lefty pitchers were Koufax and Carleton, Righties, Marichal and Gibson. Rivera was number one out of the bullpen. Nobody dominated like him.

Gil was the best manager, always ahead of the game.

I thought Aaron Boone did a pretty good job in 2019 with all those injuries, but he made a mistake in the playoffs. The guys who got him there weren’t on the roster. He changed the makeup of the team bringing guys back that weren’t sick anymore. Stanton and those guys should not have been brought back.

I was 17 when I came up. They thought I was going to lead the team to the promised land. I struggled, but at that age you should be in the minors, against your own age group, dominating. The “experts” said that since I didn’t hit .300 then I’m not good.

The difference between .260 and .300 is not that many hits, but the difference between 17 and 23 years of age is major as far as maturing. When I finally caught up with the league, they said I had been around forever although I was only 25. I was around 8 years, and they said, “He’s an old man by now,” but I was not. I learned and was ready to dominate, and I did, hitting .290, .300 but they said I was over the hill and it screwed me up.

M: Who was your first hitting coach?

E: We didn’t have any real hitting coaches. Our first was Rogers Hornsby, all he told us was to “...swing at a strike.” He didn’t last a season. The Mets got rid of him because he was a total waste. He didn’t like young guys. He didn’t offer anything. He had to tell me to swing at a strike? We learned that in little league.

Then we had Yogi all those years. He wasn’t a batting coach. He said “swing,
but if you can’t hit it don’t swing.” But what happens when you have two strikes? He said then “then swing at it.”

That’s a batting coach? come on. Today they have coaches.

M: What are you doing now

E: I’ve been in the Credit Card business for 25 years, one office in Boca and one in Calverton. I don’t go there, especially now. In a normal world if I’m meeting an owner I make an appointment and make a presentation. I can be anywhere and pick up a client. If you know someone on Staten Island I’ll go there and open up an account.

When I worked for Pfizer they sent me to Dale Carnegie to learn how to get their message across. They didn’t care that I was a baseball player and a member of the ‘69 World Series winners. I was selling their drugs across the country, meeting with the press. They wanted me to mention the drug on national TV. That was my message. And if I didn’t get my message about the drugs across during the interview then I’d get fired. Once I got the message across I was home free.

...and you get better at it. Mickey Callaway said nothing, couldn’t even speak. To me if you’re working for an organization like the Yankee or Mets, you’re major. You have a platform. The team should have the best guy going to help you out.

I’m the only guy around who knows what happened in the 60’s. I don’t want to hear people talk about the 60’s if they weren’t there. Otherwise it’s hearsay, third party. Words from someone else.

M: You’d be great doing what Ralph Kiner was doing on the later Met broadcasts. He had such a perspective on baseball for so many years. You’d be great, a bunch of games. You’d be another Ralph!

E: Thanks for that.

M: I hope when there’s real baseball again you can get a chance.

E: I have faith. Just as I, baseball and the world will survive and outlast this horror.