

AROUND THE BASES

**Around the bases with K-
State baseball legend
Craig Wilson**

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Former Kansas State Hall of Fame baseball player Craig Wilson swings at a pitch in a game against Iowa State in April of 1992. Wilson was the Big 8 Conference Player of the Year in 1992.
Mercury file photo

Craig Wilson was a four-year starter at Kansas State second base/shortstop during his career earning honors as the Wildcats' first consensus baseball All-American.

He earned first team All-America honors from Baseball America and second team recognition from Collegiate Baseball in 1992.

In 1992, he was named Big 8 Conference Player of the Year. Other accolades included being selected to the All-Big Eight team three times, including first team honors in 1991 and 1992 and second team accolades in 1990.

Wilson ranks among K-State's top five in six career categories, including placing second in hits (282), runs scored (181), doubles (58), triples (15) and third in at-bats (809) and RBI (176).

He became a member of the 1992 U.S. Olympic Baseball Team, the first Olympic baseball team in the countries history, and the 1991 U.S. Pan American baseball team before going on to play four seasons of Major League Baseball with the Chicago White Sox.

Wilson was inducted the Kansas State Athletics Hall of Fame in 2004.

I sat down with Craig over a couple of beers to get an update and learn more about his experiences.

Chapman: When did you start playing and what got you interested in baseball as a kid?

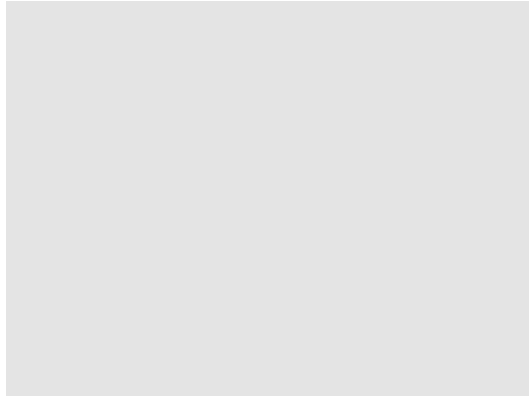
Wilson: Nobody has ever asked me that. I was about 9 years old. I watched some games on T.V., mostly Chicago Cubs games in the summer since they were on during the day.

Chapman: What about high school? Any moments stand out from then?

Wilson: Yes, believe it or not I pitched a no hitter AND LOST! 1-0. The opposing pitcher was throwing a one hitter at the time. Some how a couple of errors and a passed ball led to them scoring but that's the way it goes sometimes.

Chapman: At what moment did you believe you could play at the college Division 1 level?

Wilson: By my junior and senior years in high school, I recognized that I was on the same level as the older guys I had played with before that were in college by then. One of my closer friends who also went to my high school was (K-Stater) Chris Hmielewski.



Former Kansas State star shortstop Craig Wilson fields a ball in a game during the 1992 season.
Mercury file photo

Chapman: How was the K-State recruitment process?

Wilson: The K- State recruitment process was an interesting one. So here's something funny. No one from K-State had ever even seen me play baseball before I was invited to campus. They only saw me play basketball. There was a Los Angeles Dodgers scout that covered the Chicagoland area and had seen me play quite a few times. I believe he was the one that made the connection with the coaches at K-State and said it would be good for me to play college ball since I really wasn't ready for pro ball yet. When I took my visit to K-State I was hosted by Jim McClellan and Jim Haller for my recruiting visit. I was trying to decide between Creighton and KSU at the time. I had so much fun in Manhattan I knew that was the place for me. Plus Hmielewski went on the trip with me but wasn't sure if he was going to play pro ball since he was drafted by the Minnesota Twins that year. He ended up coming to K State with me which made it nice to have a familiar face in a different town.

Chapman: Tell me what the name Mike Clark means to you?

Wilson: He's a second father. I think about it now as I am 53 and he was only a 36-year-old coach then. Undertaking a program with no budget, no facility, who sacrificed everything for us players. We would have liked to win more for him and get to a regional, but we had some solid years especially in 1990 when we made the Big 8 Tournament and he was Big 8 Coach of the Year that year.

Chapman: What was he like as a coach?

Wilson: Coach Clark handled the pitchers and general team operations, so Phil Morgan was really the coach I worked with most. He worked with the infield, but all the coaches on the K-State staff influenced us and also kept us in line!

Chapman: I always kind of felt bad for Coach Clark. He worked so hard to make that stadium happen and then once across the finish line he retired gracefully to let a new generation of coaches take the program to new heights.

Wilson: We saw plans for that stadium when I was recruited, and it took years until it finally happened. Coach in my opinion was the person that really evolved that program. There were some great coaches before him but he was the one that got things going. He fought every day for the things it took to make that program successful.

Chapman: Speaking of that old field you played on and the "stadium," I assume that facility was the worst you played in?

Wilson: You can't call that a facility. It was a bumpy field with terrible grass. When it rained and the field got wet we used to light the field on fire to try and dry it out. We as a team worked on the field just as much as we played on that field.

We actually built our "stadium" my sophomore year. We took the old bleachers from Ahearn since the basketball team moved to Bramlage and we assembled them like Legos until there weren't any left. We had two hours of practice and two hours of construction every day.

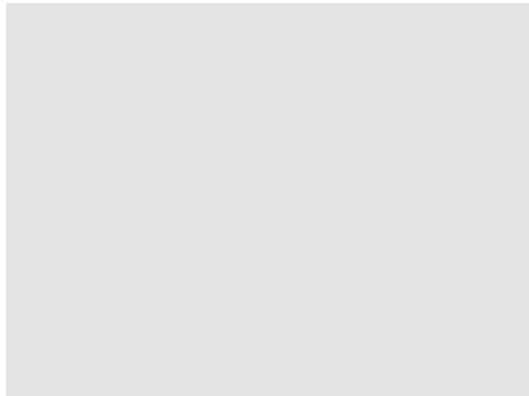
Chapman: Tell me a funny KSU memory.

Wilson: Man there were a lot of them but one that comes to mind is we were playing Nebraska at home and a storm came in from out of nowhere. Winds picked up crazy fast so we were scrambling to get the tarp on. Since we were playing a lot of the guys

had to change from their metal spikes to turfs so we didn't rip the tarp. While we are changing our shoes most of the pitching staff and coaches were able to get the tarp unraveled close to the infield. I remember being in the dugout and with one big gust of wind our tarp ripped right in half. We put chair down to hold the tarp in place most of the time and wind sent those chairs flying. Worst part was Nebraska didn't do anything to help us out. I know Coach Clark would have told us to get out there in that situation and help. Crazy time indeed.

Chapman: Weren't you drafted by the Giants and then the White Sox? How does that work?

Wilson: Yes, I got drafted by the Giants in the 23rd round, and to be honest you don't really make very good money if you go that late. I was planning on returning to the Alaska summer league where I played the summer before. Out of the blue I received a call from Team USA's head coach Ron Polk and he invited me down to Millington, Tenn. to try out for the Pan American team.



Craig Wilson reaches to tag Cuba's Lourdes Guriel Delgado as he tries to steal second base in the second inning of a game at the Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, Aug. 4, 1992.
Associated Press

Chapman: Oh yes, Team USA and then the Olympics.

Wilson: So yes, I decided to forgo, turned down the offer and opted to stay at K-State, keep improving and hope for a better draft the next year and also to compete for Team USA.

Chapman: That was the Pan American Games?

Wilson: Yes, Coach Ron Cole was our coach and I won the short stop competition. We got to travel to Japan and even Cuba, which was a lifetime experience. Even getting to see Fidel Castro!

Chapman: It's 1992, your senior year. I remember going to several games that season and watching you make a lot of amazing plays and hit a few homers too.

Wilson: Yes that was a very good year for me personally. I felt like I played well the whole year until the last 4-5 games when I hit a mini-slump. As a team, I felt like we underachieved that year a bit and felt like we should have won more games than we did. It was still a decent year but I thought we had the players to be better but it just didn't click.

Chapman: So, you're drafted in 1992 by the White Sox and then six seasons later is your debut in the big show. How was that six year grind?

Wilson: The way it typically works is you have a natural progression for the young guys until you reach about the age of 24-26 and then you either jump up to the Majors or your time starts running out.

I had some very solid years progressing through A ball to AA to AAA. In 1998, I was told that I was going to start the year in AAA as a utility player which is never a good sign.

My manager Tom Spencer had me the year before in AAA and became a fan of mine seeing me play every day as opposed to just a few days here and there when he was an outfield roving instructor. He told me to stay positive and that he would get me in the lineup as much as he could. Well the starting second baseman was really struggling in the beginning of the year and I was able to get in the lineup everyday and had one of the better years of my career. Even so, I was 27 years old and the clock was ticking and really thought my chance of making to the big leagues was not going to happen.

Chapman: When did you get the call up?

Wilson: Our general manager Ron Schuler was coming to watch us play in Oklahoma City because we had just signed Jim Abbott and he was on a path to make a comeback in the big leagues. That series I played really well going 8-14 so I did as much as I could to make a good impression. Abbott got called up right after the game he pitched while the team was heading back to Calgary. When we got back to Calgary I received a call from Dan Evans who was the assistant GM at the time telling me to meet the big league team in Baltimore, I was going to "The Show."

Chapman: Who did you tell first?

Wilson: I am pretty sure my wife, then family then old teammates. Yeah better list it that way so I don't get in trouble. Hahaha. (We both laugh). Honestly, I was in shock so who knows what happened.

Chapman: What was your first day in the show like?

Wilson: I took a really early flight from Calgary to Baltimore and got in around 2 p.m. for that night's game. Went straight to the field to get situated and most of the team was already there. After all of the minor league flights sitting in the middle seats in coach with no room it was very nice to be in first class on my way to Baltimore. I had been in big league Spring Training with most of the guys on the team so I was comfortable with them and wasn't nervous going in.

Chapman: Who were your first locker room encounters?

Wilson: Funny story.....One of the first people I interacted with was Robin Ventura. He asked me what I was swinging and I told him I didn't bring any bats, just figured they would have some here for me since this was the big leagues. The bats you swing in the minor leagues aren't very good so I didn't think they were necessary to bring with... rookie mistake. Robin went and got two of his bats which were the nicest bats I ever

had. Ironically, those bats ended up helping me break a 71-year-old record for highest batting average in a season with over 50 plate appearances at .468.

Chapman: Hey, part of that record was just in the news since we talked last week.

Wilson: Yes, Bobby Witt Jr. was the 14th player in MLB history to have 4 hits, 4 runs scored, 5 RBI's, 2 homers and 1 stolen base in a single game. I was the fourth player to do it in 1998. Social Media grabbed a hold of it and I ended up seeing it which was pretty cool.

Chapman: Was that your first game?

Wilson: I was on the bench the first two games in Baltimore and then got to start at Home vs the Yankees. Pitching that night was Andy Pettitte vs my old friend from Calgary Jim Abbott. I wasn't even nervous. I had nothing to lose so I just decided to go out there and enjoy it.

Chapman: I recall you had a pretty great debut in front of your family and hometown friends.

Wilson: I went 3-for-4 with three runs scored, two doubles, a home run and two RBIs in his MLB debut against the New York Yankees on Sept. 5, 1998. The story told, my grandma called my home run in my last at bat before I hit it. The stars were aligned that night.

Chapman: Wow that's a great start and the Chicago fans can be rough, they must have loved you.

Wilson: Yes it was a great start and I was getting a lot of good local press especially since I was from Chicago. I grew up watching the Sox and was really a huge fan of Harold Baines so it was pretty cool to be back in Chicago again.

Chapman: It was hard to follow you back then. You were in Chicago and New York and Detroit? And Kansas City?

Wilson: You got that right! It's hard for me to remember and I lived it! In 2004 I signed with the (Chicago) Cubs but I was released right after spring training. I went back to the Yankees a final time in extended spring training to get ready to go to AAA. As I was getting ready to go Mark Newman the Minor League Director at the time asked me if I would be interested in undertaking the role of a player/coach in AA instead of heading to AAA. I was contemplating going into coaching after I retired so I thought it would be a good learning experience. I told him as long as you pay me the same in AA as you would in AAA I would do it.

Well, the person I was to mentor was Robinson Cano who went on to be a World Series champ and All-Star. Great player! From the first I bat I saw him he laced a fastball down the right field line and understood why everyone was so high on him.

Chapman: When were you at KC?

Wilson: I signed with Royals when I was 30 years old and it was a really weird spring. Things with the organization were not going as promised and I wasn't called up. I still wanted to play and to prove I could but my window was closing fast. I had a really good year that year but it just wasn't in the cards and that's how it goes sometimes.

I signed with Detroit right after the season was over with the Royals. Went to Big League spring training and had one of my better spring seasons. With 1-2 days left before we broke camp, they traded for Damian Jackson to fill the utility spot so unfortunately I was sent down to AAA soon thereafter. We had a great club there and all of the guys were a lot of fun.

After that year, I was having trouble finding a team to sign with so I started the year in the Mexican League. I really struggled with the food there and lost about 20 lbs. I finally

had hope as I found a Sam's Club and stocked my freezer with food I was used to. Unfortunately, I was released a couple of days later.

Chapman: Didn't you play in the minor leagues with Michael Jordan for the White Sox?

Wilson: Yes, It was an amazing experience. I could talk about this for hours. So many great stories.

First off, Spring Training was a media circus like I had never experienced. The first time I really saw any interaction was in the weight room. A teammate of ours, Jimmy Hurst, who was a real character, had played basketball in JuCo, but was a serious smack talker. He was giving MJ a very hard time, and that's when I realized he was a pretty good guy. He was good at the give and take and seems to love the locker room and just being with the guys.

I was playing A ball and he was AA, so we were on different squads, but at the end of the Spring, he started back with us for the last game. He told anyone that hit a jack that he would give us three new pair of Jordan's. Everyone of us tried like heck. I don't think I have ever swung so hard! But I didn't homer and no Jordans for me. One guy did though, but you know I was never a power hitter anyway, so it would have been unexpected.

Chapman: Were you gamblers?

Wilson: While at Birmingham, MJ and us would have lots of the same days off and we played some serious card games. He was always so competitive, on the field off the field. He would challenge all the time on about anything, but in the end, he was just one of the guys.

Chapman: Did you ever play basketball with Michael?

Wilson: I did! One day about 15 guys all White Sox players went to meet him at some court in the city. He was the last one there and not one of us brought a basketball! So we saw some young kids playing and we went over to borrow their balls for a while. Soon though they had to go, time for dinner. We begged them to stay longer and let us use their basketballs, and one of our guys says, "If you will be patient, Michael Jordan will be here to play with us." And they didn't believe us and were starting to get a little angry and really wanting to leave. Then all of a sudden Jordan pulls up, puts on his shoes and grabs some boxes from his trunk. Walks up and says, "What's up boys?" and those kids were absolutely mesmerized. He of course had new Jordans for all of the pitchers to wear that had size 13 feet.

Chapman: How did you play?

Wilson: Well of course he dominated every aspect of the game, but I did get a rebound and threw it to him on a fast break and he jammed it as he does. It was pretty awesome to see, but to get that thrill of passing him the assist was definitely a life long highlight. I will also add that I never felt so much pressure in my life at the free throw line! I had to make it to be on his team.

Chapman: Do you stay in touch with Michael? Does he know you?

Wilson: We don't hang out or don't text each other, but I will say that from between meeting him in 1994 and then several years later I was in the tunnel at Comisky after a game and was chatting with Frank Thomas. One of the trainers said hey Frank, Jordan wants to chat with you. So Frank and I went to see him. I tagged along just to see if he remembered me and say hi.

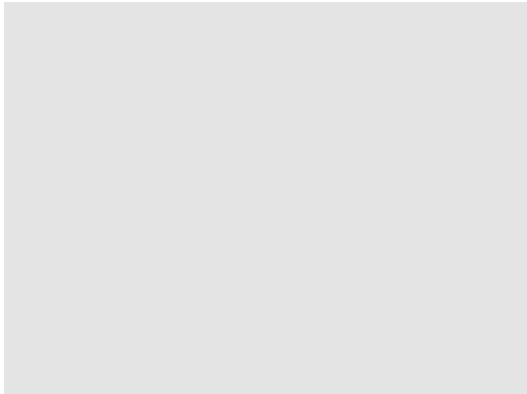
"Willie!" he says... "Dang, I should have stuck with baseball if you're still in it!" So he did then and that was funny and pretty cool, but I don't know now if he would.

My final word on Michael Jordan was that his work ethic was amazing and you know, baseball wasn't his sport. In basketball he could do anything on the court instinctively,

but for baseball, he really learned from ground zero and despite what people say, it's not easy having a .250 batting average even in the minor leagues, and he did it because he was a tireless competitor, determined to master it. Even if it wasn't pretty, he was never too full of himself to feel challenged and I was blessed to get to meet him, know him and be around him.

Chapman: Let's fast forward to today or more recent times. Do you follow KSU baseball, go to games?

Yes, I go as much as I can. I love watching the team and I do some occasional color on radio broadcasts or recently calling games from the booth for ESPN Plus.



Former Kansas State baseball legend Craig Wilson, middle, stands with current K-State infielder Kaelen Culpepper, left, and closer Tyson Neighbors, right, during a recent trip to Manhattan.
Courtesy of Craig Wilson

Chapman: Thoughts about the new KSU Tointon Stadium?

Wilson: Amazing! That place has come so far, it's just so nice — better than most minor league parks, especially the locker rooms.

Chapman: As I recall, there were no locker rooms when you were in school.

Wilson: It was just what we had, a shoestring budget and so I was lucky that my grandparents came to almost every home game. My grandma would actually clean my

uniforms at the Days Inn and I would get it back when I met them for breakfast the next morning. You take those time for granted but looking back she was a blessing.

Chapman: With everyone washing their own jerseys and taking care of them, it's a miracle they remained the same color.

Wilson: Oh they didn't. By about mid season there were about 15 shades of purple on our team and the white jerseys were mismatched too. The jersey I have framed at home is kinda lavender, kinda purple, kinda looks rough and has buttons missing still. When I framed it I didn't want to sew on new buttons because I wanted it to look the way I wore it.

Chapman: Do you keep in touch with any of the guys in the pros or from K-State?

Wilson: Yes, mostly guys from college. We have a text group with the old team that gets pretty funny.

Chapman: What do you do now?

Wilson: I have been in the staffing industry for 20 years. I am currently with Innova Solutions which is an IT staffing and solutions firm based out of Atlanta.

My wife Susan is a CPA. Her and I live in Kansas City and we have a son that went to K-State and is finishing up at Johnson County Community College in Computer Science.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the sacrifice of my baseball family over the years.

What you don't see, behind the scenes for me and every other player were, in my case, Susan packing up the kid, dog, clothes and everything, drive 14 hours to meet me somewhere where I would only be home for 2 weeks out of the month, then pack it all up and head to the next place or back home after the season is over.

Never being able to plan too far in advance. It was grueling for me and I know it was for her, my family and everyone. And we made it through and have a great family today.

Link: https://themercury.com/k_state_sports/around-the-bases-with-k-state-baseball-legend-craig-wilson/article_3a4496ba-eede-5186-9f27-93c07141ca72.html