Charlie White, Leon Day, and a Groundbreaking Summer in Toronto

The Integration Story of the International League Maple Leafs

Presentation by Mackenzie Longpré

For nearly as long as organized baseball has existed, Canada and its ballplayers have played a role in the game's integration. William Galloway blazed a trail as the first Black Canadian to play organized baseball in 1899. Charlie Culver paved the way for Black baseball in Quebec. Jimmie Claxton was the first Black man to play in the white minor leagues when he pitched briefly for the Oakland Oaks in 1916. Manny McIntyre was one of only six Black players in white organized baseball when he integrated the Sherbrooke Canadians, a Cardinals farm team, in 1946. Fred Thomas integrated the Eastern League when he joined Cleveland's farm team, the Wilkes-Barre Barons in 1948. The historic Chatham Coloured All-Stars are still lauded as a Canadian institution, and famously won the integrated Ontario Intermediate B title in 1934. And of course, no integration story can be told about Canadian baseball without mentioning Jackie Robinson and his time with the 1946 Triple A Montreal Royals in his lead up to breaking the major league colour barrier the following year.

Though certainly not immune to the bigotry and ugliness so prevalent in the Jim Crow-era United States, Canada, by and large, was much more accepting of Black ballplayers. Black baseball teams found strong footings all across the country, Black barnstorming teams regularly sang the praises of Canadian hospitality, and Negro League stars often found second careers playing baseball north of the border on Black, white, and mixed clubs alike. For all of

these reasons, and myriad others, Montreal of the International League could not have been a more perfect destination for Jackie Robinson to begin his career in white organized baseball. With the floodgates cracked open in the International League, and Major League Baseball shortly thereafter, the Toronto Maple Leafs, also of the International League, seemed poised to sign their first Black ballplayer.

The integration story of the Toronto Maple Leafs is often overlooked. It took five years after Robinson's debut with Montreal for the Leafs to add any Black ballplayers to their roster. This delay was due largely to the club's affiliation with the famously integration-averse Boston Red Sox and Philadelphia Phillies, two of the last major league teams to field Black players. In 1951, three events helped push the club towards integration. First, the Leafs' affiliation shifted to the St. Louis Browns, the third white major league team to sign Black ballplayers in 1947. Next, Bill Veeck, the game's most vocal pro-integration owner, purchased the Browns, and immediately made it a priority to sign Black



ballplayers. Finally, Jack Kent Cooke, a gregarious, Veeck-ian, Canadian businessman, purchased the Maple Leafs. With all of this pro-integration infrastructure in place to support the initiative, Veeck and Cooke wasted little time bringing two Black players, Charlie White (b. 12 August, 1927 Kinston, North Carolina) and Leon Day (b. 30 October, 1916 Alexandria, Virginia), to Toronto.

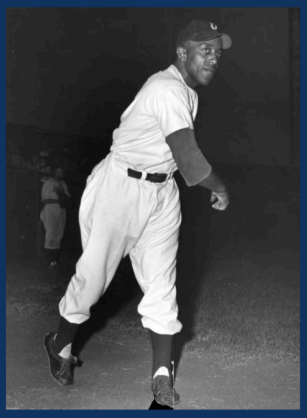
Veeck took control of the St. Louis Browns on July 3, 1951. Just two days later, Cooke finalized his purchase of the Maple Leafs. This complete sea change at the major and minor league levels primed the Browns franchise for renewed, organization-wide integration. Among all of Veeck's innovative manoeuvrings to try to raise the profile and fortunes of his perennially cellar-dwelling team, his most important was reuniting with his old friend from Cleveland, Satchel Paige. With Paige well into his mid-40s, many viewed this signing as a publicity stunt. But Veeck had faith in the pitcher's ability and was rewarded with two and a half years of excellent, All-Star calibre performance.

Upon taking the reins of the Maple Leafs, Cooke, like Veeck had been doing for years, drove headlong down the promotions route to lure more paying customers to the ballpark. He gave out free hot dogs and pop and orchids for female fans, hired a pole sitter to remain on his perch until the Leafs made it out of the bottom half of the league, and arranged celebrity appearances from Gloria de Haven and Victor Borge. Most importantly, he moved swiftly to add Black players to the long-segregated Leafs. Whether this was done to improve the quality of play on the field, to act as its own form of promotional gag, because Cooke truly believed in breaking down this long-held colour barrier, or some combination thereof, the post-integration era had begun for the Leafs. Veteran Leon Day and young Charlie White officially became the franchise's first Black players.

During the week and change leading up to their signings, the names of several Black players were being floated as potential signees for the Browns' top minor league affiliate. A Cuban medical student at Harvard University named Tony Marquetti became the first Black player to try out for the Leafs. Additionally, Veeck asked for five Black players from the Winnipeg Buffalos in the ManDak league to report to Toronto. This group comprised Day, White, James Newberry, Johnny Kennedy, and Butch Davis. After some careful vetting, Day and White were the two players selected to join the Leafs. On July 17, White made his debut for the team first and became the first Black player to appear in a game for the Maple Leafs. Day made his debut four days later in a pitching appearance out of the bullpen.

Leon Day was born in Alexandria, Virginia in 1916 and grew up in Baltimore. From a young age, he followed the local Baltimore Black Sox of the Negro National League, and his love for the game steadily developed through childhood. He dropped out of high school, then after some time playing with semipro teams, he was invited to join the Black Sox as a 17-year-old in 1934.

Leon Day



Day was a star with the Newark Eagles across nine seasons

The team folded that offseason, and Day followed several of his teammates and his manager to Brooklyn to play for the Eagles, who would move to Newark in 1936.

From then on, Day spent his entire Negro League career with Newark, save for a year off in 1940 to seek better pay in Venezuela and Mexico, a few brief stints on loan to the Homestead Grays, and two prime years missed to military service during World War II. Day built a reputation as an excellent pitcher, hitter, and fielder. Primarily a moundsman, he also played an able second base and all three outfield positions. Summarizing the feelings of many contemporaries, Clarence Israel called the two-way playing Day “the most complete ball player I've ever seen.” Over nine seasons with the Eagles, he pitched to a 3.38 ERA, which makes for a 137 ERA+, with a 2.45 FIP. He also slashed .312/.361/.419 for a 115 OPS+.

Day's short stature belied his dominance on the mound. Though he used a short-arm delivery, he still managed to feature a speedier fastball than most of his contemporaries, with a great changeup and curveball as complements. Cool Papa Bell said of his arsenal, “Day had *smoke*! And his curve ball would break like that – quick.” Day holds a few esteemed Negro League records: he has the most All-Star appearances with seven, and he has the single-game strikeout record with 18 from a 1942 contest against the Elite Giants. His final

season with Newark started off with a bang as he fired a no-hitter in the first game of the Eagles' season against the Philadelphia Stars. That Eagles team is regarded as one of the finest in the history of the game, their season culminating in a World Series title.

Day journeyed to Mexico and Cuba for the 1947 and 1948 seasons. In 1949, he returned to a much-depleted Negro American League and his hometown team, the Baltimore Elite Giants, helping them to a pennant and championship over the Chicago American Giants. In 1950, he departed for northern climes, and many familiar former teammates, joining the Winnipeg Buffalos in the Manitoba-Dakota League, where he would play for a year and a half.

Unlike Day, eleven years his senior, Charlie White had little professional baseball experience before Bill Veeck and the Toronto Maple Leafs came calling. Born in Kinston, North Carolina in 1927, White joined the Philadelphia Stars of the Negro American League in 1950. This period marked the twilight of the Negro Leagues, as a result of more widespread integration across the white major leagues. White only spent one season in Philadelphia, but while there, he came under the wing of the great Oscar Charleston. He mainly played catcher, and by early June he was regarded as one of the league's finer backstops. A career highlight occurred on July 24 when Satchel Paige joined the Stars for a single game. He pitched against the Homestead Grays, formed

Charlie White



White was a highly-touted young catcher in the Negro Leagues, and eventually a Milwaukee Brave

a battery with White, lasted three innings, and drove in his catcher with a double to deep center.

After his tenure with the Philadelphia Stars, White went where so many other Negro Leaguers found themselves, the Winnipeg Buffalos of the ManDak League. White joined a 1951 roster that included, among several other Black American ballplayers, player/manager Willie Wells, Lyman Bostock, and the man who would become his integration partner in Toronto, Leon Day. Data is unavailable for his short time with Winnipeg, but we do know that he was mostly playing on the infield, likely at third base. And we also know that he, along with Day, played well enough to be two of the five players considered for acquisition by the Browns and an assignment with the Maple Leafs.

White, Day, and the 1951 Toronto Maple Leafs



(Left to right): Day, Cooke, and White - the architects of Maple Leaf integration

By the time White and Day reported to the Leafs, the team was beginning a series in Ottawa against the Giants. White marked the beginning of the post-integration Maple Leafs when he made his debut on July 17. He played both games of a doubleheader, a 3-0 win and a 3-0 loss. White started at shortstop in the first game and third base in the second. At the plate, he recorded two hits in eight at bats between both games, and despite the position changes, he played sound defense. Four days later in Buffalo, Day made his first appearance with the Leafs. In a contest that Toronto went on to lose 9-6, he pitched two scoreless, no-hit innings in relief while allowing one walk and striking out one.

Despite nice debuts for each, early returns for White and Day were not entirely positive. In a July 26 editorial, *Toronto Star* columnist Neil MacCarl wrote of White that he “can scarcely be classed as a utility man...[he] hasn't shown much at the plate.” And of Day, MacCarl claimed that he “doesn't appear to be Triple A either.” As if in response to MacCarl, White enjoyed his best day as a Maple Leaf just three days later in a split of a doubleheader in Springfield. The third baseman went 5 for 9 across the two games with a double, three RBI, and two runs scored.

On July 30, the Leafs returned to Toronto for the first time since White and Day joined the team. The Leafs hosted the Montreal Royals for a Monday twi/night double header. The two men were showered with ovations from a capacity crowd. Though the Leafs lost the shortened, seven-inning first game, the Fleet Street faithful got to enjoy a two-hit performance from White, and watched Day finish the game on the mound without allowing a hit, while striking out one and walking one. This homecoming contest drew 15,127 spectators, the largest crowd of the season. It brought the total attendance for just six home games under Cooke's ownership to 55,000. Remarkably, these record numbers were turning out for a fifth-place team. It seems that Cooke's Veeck-inspired promotions, along with his rapid push for integration, were attractive to baseball fans in Toronto. The home debuts of White and Day were supplemented by a contest for prizes including a car, a television, a lambskin coat, a watch, and portable radios. Ruth Carrier, that year's Miss Toronto, was a guest of honour, adding to the pageantry.

As White and Day began enjoying more consistent success on the field, and each had more time to settle in with the club, praise for the two players began flowing in. In an early August interview with *The Globe and Mail*, manager Joe Becker gushed over their performances, their work ethics, their knowledge of the game, and their playing styles. Perhaps more tellingly for the two players, Veeck was made aware of their successes. In particular, during a late July visit, a Browns scout informed the owner that he thought White looked like a more promising prospect than Larry Doby had been. Manager and big league owner impressed, White must have also been happy to know that he was voted the second most popular player by the fans in a late season poll.

One of Cooke's promotional initiatives was to celebrate each player's birthday with pre- or postgame ceremonies. The celebrants were presented a birthday cake and gifted a wristwatch. White's twenty-fourth birthday, on August 12, coincided with a Sunday afternoon game at Maple Leaf Stadium against

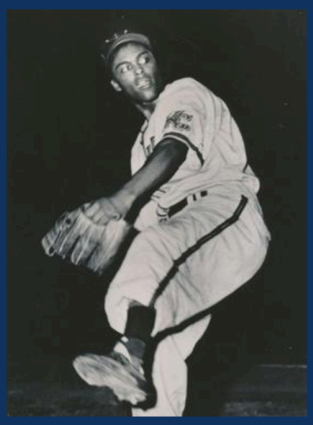
Baltimore. The Leafs ultimately coughed up a one-run lead in the eighth inning to lose the contest 6-5. But White brought the birthday celebrations with him to the plate that day and hit his first Maple Leafs home run. His second long ball of the season would support a Leafs 6-3 victory over Montreal on August 30.

Meanwhile, Day was continuing to pitch well out of the bullpen. Then, on September 3, he got an opportunity to start his first and only game for the Leafs. Day's assignment was the second game of a Monday doubleheader in Toronto against Ottawa. The Leafs handily won the first game 9-0. Heading into the second contest, the two teams agreed to play only seven innings. Day ended up pitching the whole way. He worked around five hits and three walks, but managed to limit the damage to just one run, while striking out two batters. Amazingly, Day's mound work may not have been his greatest contribution to the team. Heading into the bottom of the seventh and final inning, the teams were deadlocked at one. With two out and shortstop Johnny Sullivan at second base, Day came to the plate. Though he was only tied on the scoreboard, Giants pitcher Pete Burnside had outdueled Day to this point, having allowed just two hits through the first six innings. As Day dug in, the crowd applauded, recognizing both Day's excellent performance to this point, and manager Becker's confidence in the veteran's offensive capabilities. Becker, the team, and the fans were all rewarded, as Day stroked a game-winning, walk-off single into center field. This nearly-singlehanded victory would be Day's only pitching win of the season.

The integration of the Maple Leafs was going well enough through the first month that a third Black player was added to the roster. A 24-year-old pitcher from Longwood, Mississippi named Frank Barnes arrived in Toronto in mid August. Barnes had previously pitched with the Negro American League Kansas City Monarchs for two seasons before being sold to the Yankees midway through the 1950 season. He spent the end of that season and the beginning of the 1951 campaign with the Yankees' Class A club, the Muskegon Clippers. His contract was then purchased by the Browns and he was sent to Toronto.

The Leafs needed more pitching, and Barnes had the team salivating after he threw seven scoreless innings in an exhibition match against the Browns in Toronto. The Leafs would go on to win the game 3-0, and Barnes struck out three, allowed four hits, and walked four. What's more, he outpitched Satchel Paige, who was his adversary on the mound for the St. Louis squad.

A Third Black Maple Leaf: Frank Barnes



Barnes pitched for the Kansas City Monarchs in 1949 and 1950

Barnes' first start in International League competition for the Leafs came on August 19. It was the second game of a doubleheader against Syracuse and was called after six innings due to Toronto's Sunday curfew law. The Leafs had won the first game, but lost the shortened contest 9-3. All of the moxie that had carried Barnes through his exhibition triumph abandoned him as he toed the rubber against the Chiefs. Over an inning plus of work, he only allowed one hit, but he walked four and uncorked a wild pitch. He was sent to the showers with none out in the second inning. The few bright spots in an otherwise dreary match were the performances of White and Day. White went one-for-two with a double, while Day pitched in relief, allowing no hits and striking out one. For good measure, he collected a hit in his only trip to the plate.

Unfortunately for the Leafs, this doubleheader split was just about the nail in the coffin for the team's aspirations of playoff baseball. They were stuck in fifth place and had been spinning their wheels for some time. Syracuse was the fourth-place team, and with the season getting late, the Leafs couldn't afford to drop any games against the clubs in front of them. Heading into the final stretch of the season, the team needed to keep an eye on sixth-place Baltimore, who were hot on Toronto's heels for fifth place in the league.

The fans, as well as the club, were feeling the frustrations of the second

division, and vented their rage during an August 17 game. Cooke had decided that the promotion for the Friday evening contest with Syracuse would be “Peach Festival Night,” and every fan would be given a free peach. In the sixth inning, Leafs right fielder Bud Heslet hit a solo shot to cut the Chiefs' lead to 5-4. It seemed that a comeback was afoot when White followed with a single. Johnny Hetki then pinch hit for the pitcher, representing the go-ahead run. He hit a grounder that forced White at second, and the relay to first was ruled in time for a double play by umpire Harry Holmes. The play was close enough, and the situation dire enough, to prompt violent protest from Becker. The riled up fans, 5,000 strong, each armed with either a peach or a peach pit, got in on the outcry in support of their team's manager and pelted Holmes with their Cooke-supplied fruit. Unfortunately for Toronto, the call stood, the rally sputtered, and the Chiefs won the game 6-4.

The 1951 Maple Leafs: Falling to the Second Division



Manager Joe Becker and owner Cooke could not save the Leafs from a fifth place finish

When the season finished on September 21, The Leafs were in fifth place, only one and a half games behind fourth-place Buffalo, who faltered down the stretch. Across his 60 games played, White slashed .283/.329/.396 with four home runs, ten doubles, two triples, and 27 runs batted in. Day had pitched in 14 games, totalling 40 innings, was credited for one win and one loss, struck out 20, and pitched to a sparkling 1.58 ERA. Newcomer Barnes didn't fare nearly as well, though he only appeared in two games, during which he gave up seven runs, five earned, on just two hits but eight walks. He only logged one

inning pitched and ended his season with a 45.00 ERA.

Barnes would go on to pitch professionally for 15 more seasons. He pitched for Toronto for parts of four more seasons before making it all the way to the big leagues with the St. Louis Cardinals, for whom he would appear in fifteen

After the Leafs: Frank Barnes



Barnes sporting a White Sox cap, a team with whom he would not appear in the majors

games over parts of three seasons. After his time in the majors, he spent eight more seasons in minor league ball before hanging up his spikes for good in 1967.

Like Barnes, White would see limited action with a major league club. He remained with the Leafs in 1952, where he was converted back into a catcher. He was then transferred to the San Antonio Missions for the 1953 campaign, and in 1954 he got the call from the Milwaukee Braves. He spent the entire season as the backup catcher for Del Crandall, and made his way into 50 games. The following year he only appeared in 12 major league games. Otherwise, he was relegated back to the minors. His next ten years were spent playing Triple A ball, many of those seasons spent with the Vancouver Mounties.

Between 1954 and 1960, White was also a fixture with many Black all-star barnstorming teams. Often organized after the season finished, such teams, captained by Black baseball megastars like Willie Mays, Roy Campanella, and

After the Leafs: Charlie White



White with the Vancouver Mounties - he played in Vancouver from 1957-1961 and again in 1965

Monte Irvin, played an extra month of exhibition games. These games were held all over North American and featured all-time greats like Hank Aaron, Frank Robinson, and Ernie Banks. White was often chosen as one of two catchers to round out these star-studded squads. White's final season in professional baseball came when he was 37 years old in 1965.

Locked out of the segregated white big leagues for most of his career, then regarded as too old to be a useful major league ball player in the post-integration era, Day never got a proper chance to play on a white major league team. Though he has more recently assumed his rightful place as one of the game's greatest players, that recognition almost came too late. A soft spoken and humble man, Day was overshadowed by his more gregarious contemporaries, like Satchel Paige and Cool Papa Bell. But he amassed terrific numbers and can lay claim to several historic accomplishments. Regardless of how he was viewed by the broader baseball world, the men who played with and against him gave regular testament to his greatness.

After the 1951 season, Day played three more years of professional baseball, ending his career with the Edmonton Eskimos, an unaffiliated club in the Western International League, and then the Brandon Greys of the ManDak League. He met his wife a few years after he quit playing, and so low was Day's profile that it took a few years after their meeting for her to discover that

After the Leafs: Leon Day



Day's Hall of Fame plaque - he was elected just five days before he passed away

he had been a professional baseball player. As more people began to learn about Day and his accomplishments on the diamond, Hall of Fame candidacy became a real possibility. It took a lot of lobbying from friends, fans, and former players, but in 1995, Cooperstown finally came calling. Day was in the hospital and his health was deteriorating rapidly, but he stuck around just long enough to hear the good news. For the next five days, he got to enjoy baseball's greatest honour from his hospital bed before he passed away.

A Post-Integration Era for Professional Baseball in Toronto



Day and White opened doors for future Black ballplayers in Toronto's white professional ranks

The integration story of the Toronto Maple Leafs is one that doesn't get told very often. The Leafs' colour line was broken a few years later than that of many other minor league teams, an unfortunate symptom of bad affiliations. It took a new big league parent club and two visionary owners to implement a paradigm shift. Both Veeck and Cooke worked quickly to add Black players to the Maple Leafs' roster, and they found two complimentary players in Charlie White and Leon Day. White was just starting his professional baseball journey, and was a potential star in the making. Day was an established veteran putting the finishing touches on a Hall of Fame career. Like so many Black players leading the charge with other previously all-white teams, the courage of White and Day should not be overlooked. For every newly integrated league, organization, or club, there were Black ballplayers facing all white teammates, largely white crowds, and new hometowns with unknown animosities.

Mackenzie Longpré
November 2026