Moses YellowHorse: The Tragic Career of a Pittsburgh Pirate

by William Jakub

The story of Moses YellowHorse, pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates and the first "full-blooded" Indian to play major league baseball, begins in 1898. Born to Thomas and Clara YellowHorse, who lived on a 160-acre farm near Pawnee, Oklahoma, Moses was among the millions of boys of his generation who grew up playing baseball. But he did so with a few special twists.

D.J.O. Ferguson, editor of the local newspaper, Pawnee Chief, and a personal friend of YellowHorse, reports that YellowHorse said that "his pitching accuracy came from throwing stones at rabbits and squirrels for the family stewing pot, and his wrist action came from doing other household chores." 2

Moses attended the Federal Indian School at Chilocco, Oklahoma, where, in addition to his studies, he honed his baseball skills and love of the game. In 1917, at the age of 19, Moses was playing both varsity ball and semi-pro ball. By 1920, he helped pitch the Travelers of Little Rock to the Southern Association Championship, sporting a record of 21 wins and 7 losses. 3

At the end of that winning season, Barney Dreyfuss, owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates, purchased YellowHorse's contract from the Travelers. 4 Dreyfuss brought the 22-year-old pitcher to Pittsburgh, thereby quickly propelling him into the history books.

Baseball was prospering after surviving the "Black Sox" gambling scandal of 1919, but the "national pastime" had other practices, notably concerning race, that today would be considered scandalous. Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Landis did nothing to eliminate the league's policy barring non-whites. Landis, according to one account, "was arbitrary, anti-minority, anti-immigrant, anti-woman, anti-nonwhite and anti what he called 'sissies,' to him all those who were interested in things cultural." 5 An unrelenting foe of integration, Landis made little effort to disguise his racial prejudice as commissioner from 1920 to 1945. Despite the existence of many talented black players, Landis sabotaged efforts to integrate them into the majors. Club owners also would not budge from the league's "white only" policy, insisting that white players would not play alongside blacks, that white fans would not attend games in which blacks played, and that hotels would not house black players on road trips.

As a result, blacks established their own teams and leagues. In
1919, Andrew “Rube” Foster, considered the “father of black baseball” and one of the most influential figures in the sport’s history, proposed to Landis that one black team join the National League and another join the American League. Landis turned the proposition down, and in 1920 Foster held a meeting with other black owners that ultimately resulted in formation of the Negro National League. Pittsburgh boasted two of the league’s finest teams, the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords.6

Although Native-Americans were not formally banned from baseball, Barney Dreyfuss’ signing of Moses YellowHorse flew in the face of tradition. YellowHorse was a full-blooded Pawnee, the likes of which had never worn a Major League uniform. From time to time, a few “mixed-blood” Native-Americans — notably Jim Thorpe, “Chief” Bender, and “Chief” Meyers — had made it to the majors. Jim Thorpe, unquestionably America’s most outstanding Indian athlete, was of French and Irish descent as well as a member of the Sac and Fox tribes. Thorpe played outfield for the New York Giants from 1913 to 1917 and was part of the 1917 Giants World Series team. He later was selected by the Associated Press as America’s best all-around male athlete of the first half of the twentieth century. Charles A. “Chief” Bender, a star pitcher for the Philadelphia Athletics from 1903 to 1914, was part German as well as part Chippewa. Bender appeared in five World Series and was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1953. Lastly, John T. “Chief” Meyers was a mixed-blood member of the Cahuilla tribe of California and a graduate of Dartmouth College. Myers, a catcher with the New York Giants from 1908 to 1915 and with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1916, played with the Giants in three World Series games and appeared with the Dodgers in their 1916 World Series debut.7

The color line had not been invoked in the cases of Thorpe, Meyers and Bender, possibly because of their mixed ancestry. But how did a “full-blooded” Indian like YellowHorse, “as dark as the previous night’s lunar eclipse,”8 gain entry into the league?

For one thing, Pirate owner Dreyfuss was a powerful force, and Commissioner Landis, although quite prejudiced against blacks, was intrigued by YellowHorse’s Indian heritage.9 Landis’ fascination with YellowHorse was so great that in the spring of YellowHorse’s first season with the Pirates, Landis summoned manager Gibson and YellowHorse to his chambers. After their meeting, highlighted by a question and answer session, Landis was impressed with the Pirates’ latest addition.10 Once back in Pittsburgh for the home opener, YellowHorse earned his first plaudits by defeating Cincinnati and becoming the first Pirate pitcher to win a home opener in his rookie season. Touted by many as the best rookie find of the year, newspaper men bestowed upon YellowHorse the moniker “Chief,” although he held no such status among his people.

The fans in Pittsburgh accepted YellowHorse. Indeed, they were swept up in frenzied support of their “favorite Indian.” In a short time, YellowHorse acquired quite a vocal following. During home games, the chant “Put in YellowHorse” would build slowly but steadily into a crescendo until the whole of Forbes Field reverberated.11 Periodically the chant was accompanied by beating drums, unintelligible war whoops and foot stomping. This adulation never adversely affected YellowHorse, who typically strode towards the pitchers mound, threw a few warm-ups, and proceeded with the business at hand. YellowHorse threw only one pitch — a “smokin’ fastball.” He had a tremendous arm and he knew it. In just four months, he became a favorite among fans in Pittsburgh and throughout the league. The possibility of YellowHorse appearing in a game almost assured the respective team owners of a record number of customers.

YellowHorse’s acceptance by baseball fans throughout the league was remarkable. He roomed with the team and was not segregated on the road, as was Jackie Robinson after the latter’s debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1940s. Moses was accepted as a full member of the Pittsburgh Pirate franchise. In fact, on one outing to play the New York Giants, the team — including YellowHorse — stayed at the posh Ansonia Hotel on New York’s Upper West Side.

YellowHorse’s presence provoked resentment among a few fans, who felt he had no business on the playing field. In the early part of the twentieth century, most Native Americans were subject to numerous racist laws and practices. Some states had laws against intermarriage between Native Americans and whites, and did not permit Native Americans to attend school with white children. Indians living on reservations were not recognized as citizens of the United States until 1924. Prior to that, they had been deprived of property rights, not permitted to vote, and were not afforded equal protection of the law. Lastly, in some Western states, Native Americans, especially those of darker skin, were prohibited from staying in white motels or eating in white restaurants, and were relegated to menial jobs or worked as migrant workers.12

Native Americans suffered discrimination because some in society considered them lazy and untrustworthy, malingerers and drunkards. Unfortunately, the few who had made it to the major leagues did little to change the widely held stereotype. Most fell victim to alcohol, a malady instrumental to many ballplayers’ demise. YellowHorse was no exception. On one occasion, “while intoxicated and carousing in the area adjacent to Forbes Field,” he was found to be belligerent and creating a disturbance.13 A police officer arrived to find YellowHorse in need of a cap remover and bleeding from using his teeth to open beer bottles. The officer and an unnamed Pirate subdued him and got him home. This was not the last time YellowHorse would succumb to the destructive influences of liquor.

YellowHorse’s promising rookie season was cut short when he sustained a groin injury requiring surgery. In 10 games, YellowHorse’s 5-3 record had helped the Pirates finish the 1921 season in second place behind New York. A healthy YellowHorse might not have significantly altered their finish, but he was sorely missed by team and fans.

In 1922, YellowHorse was fully recovered from his groin injury and eagerly awaited the start of a new season. According to a local newspaper, YellowHorse was in the best shape and condition of all the Pittsburgh players.14 He believed he had much to
prove. However, that was not to be the case. By June of that season, manager Gibson was replaced by hometown favorite Bill McKechnie amid charges of heavy drinking by unnamed ballplayers and a general lack of discipline on the team. Fingers pointed at Moses YellowHorse and his roommate, Pirate shortstop and future Hall of Famer Walter "Rabbit" Maranville, but nothing was ever proven.

Dissatisfaction with YellowHorse began to surface among Pirate fans. An October newspaper account predicted "as a pitcher and player his days are few." Ironically, this was the same newspaper that in 1921 had touted him the "best all-round player," and in 1922 had considered him "the best player (physically) to come out of Spring training." Nor was YellowHorse meeting the expectations of the owners. His drinking and disruptive behavior did little to dispel well-engrained stereotypes of Indians. Lastly, one may surmise that many in baseball considered YellowHorse a threat to the status quo.

As the 1922 season wore on, YellowHorse's effectiveness waned, both as pitcher and as crowd pleaser. The alcohol had a deleterious effect on his performance; Dreyfuss and McKechnie were disheartened. In August, YellowHorse contracted severe tonsillitis and was again hospitalized. His second year came to an abrupt end, after appearing in 28 games, compiling a 3-1 record and 4.52 an earned run average, and batting a respectable .316.

In December of 1922, YellowHorse was traded to the Sacramento Senators of the Pacific Coast League.

YellowHorse threw, by later accounts, with the power and finesse of Walter Johnson, the heralded pitcher of the Washington Senators. He also possessed a good baseball "sense" and was eager to learn. Between 1923 and 1924, YellowHorse played sporadically in the minor leagues. Perhaps his finest season was 1923 with the Sacramento Senators. As the ace of the pitching staff, he helped pitch the Senators to a second-place finish, ending the season with a 22-13 record and an E.R.A. of 3.68.

By the middle of the 1924 season, YellowHorse was finished even with the minors. He injured his arm midway through the season, and at age 28, returned home to Pawnee, Oklahoma.

For many years afterward, YellowHorse tirelessly donated time and energies to tribal concerns, especially to the younger members. He helped establish youth baseball, often serving as coach, occasionally umpiring semi-pro games, and pitching when the need arose. He spent many hours schooling the youth in Pawnee traditions, ceremonies and language, which were disappearing. Though schooled in the white man's ways, YellowHorse never abandoned his Pawnee heritage.

In 1935, YellowHorse was immortalized in popular culture by another of Pawnee's famous sons, Chester Gould, author and creator of the nationally syndicated comic strip "Dick Tracy." Gould introduced a character known as "Chief YellowPony," a benevolent aide to Tracy.

By the early 1960s, YellowHorse's place in Pawnee society was solidified, and he was held in high esteem. His positive influence on Pawnee youth was evident. "The tribe honored YellowHorse on his 66th birthday. A feast and ceremonial war dance were given in recognition of his accomplishments past and present." However, the specter of death stepped forward and three months later, on April 10, 1964, Moses YellowHorse died of an apparent heart attack. He was buried with the traditional Pawnee ceremonies and interred in the North Indian Cemetery, Pawnee, Oklahoma. In his honor, an annual softball tournament was initiated, and by the late 1960s a housing project was erected bearing his name.

YellowHorse's death in 1964 was reported in local papers but received no mention in any Pittsburgh newspapers. But in 1970, his name resurfaced in Pittsburgh, showing he had not been entirely forgotten by Pirate fans. As the city and the Pirates readied a new stadium, a debate swirled over what to call it. The Pittsburgh Press, in an article entitled "Stadium Name Game Took Some Funny Hops Along the Way," listed various names, legitimate and sarcastic. Some suggested that it be named Pie Traynor Field in honor of one of the most revered Pirates of all time, or Flying Dutchman Field to honor Honus Wagner. Others with an eye for colorful titles leaned toward Chief YellowHorse Stadium.

In the end, the park was christened simply "Three Rivers Stadium."