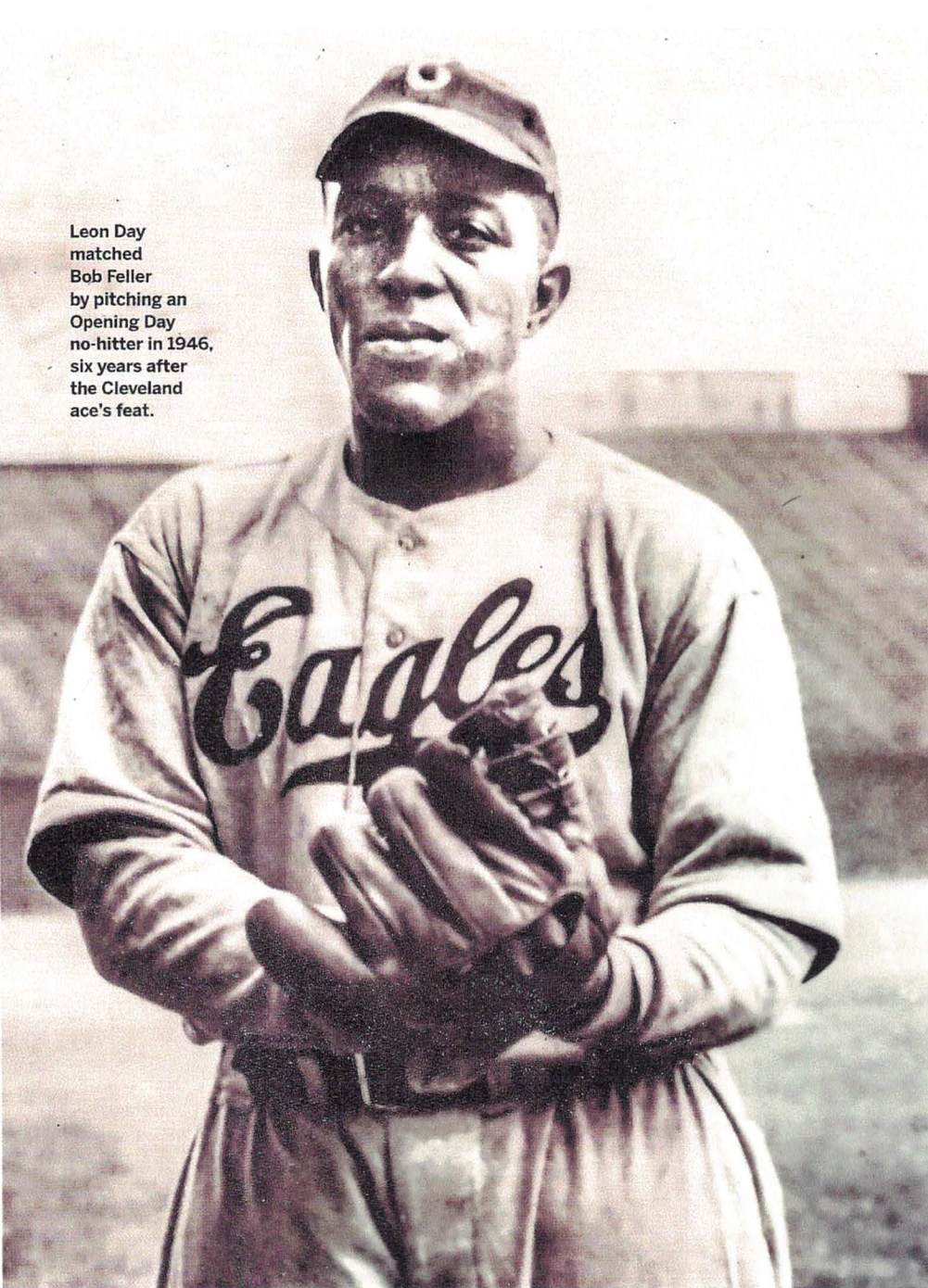


# Opening Daylight

HALL OF FAMERS LEON DAY AND SACHEL PAIGE  
REWROTE HISTORY IN NEGRO LEAGUES OPENERS.

By Larry Lester

Leon Day  
matched  
Bob Feller  
by pitching an  
Opening Day  
no-hitter in 1946,  
six years after  
the Cleveland  
ace's feat.



**H**ooray for Opening Day! On this day, we skip class, skip work and indulge in fantasies about how long we'll stay at the top of the standings after just one game. It's the day when that perennial dream, the one that says, "Wait 'til next year," feels like it has finally arrived.

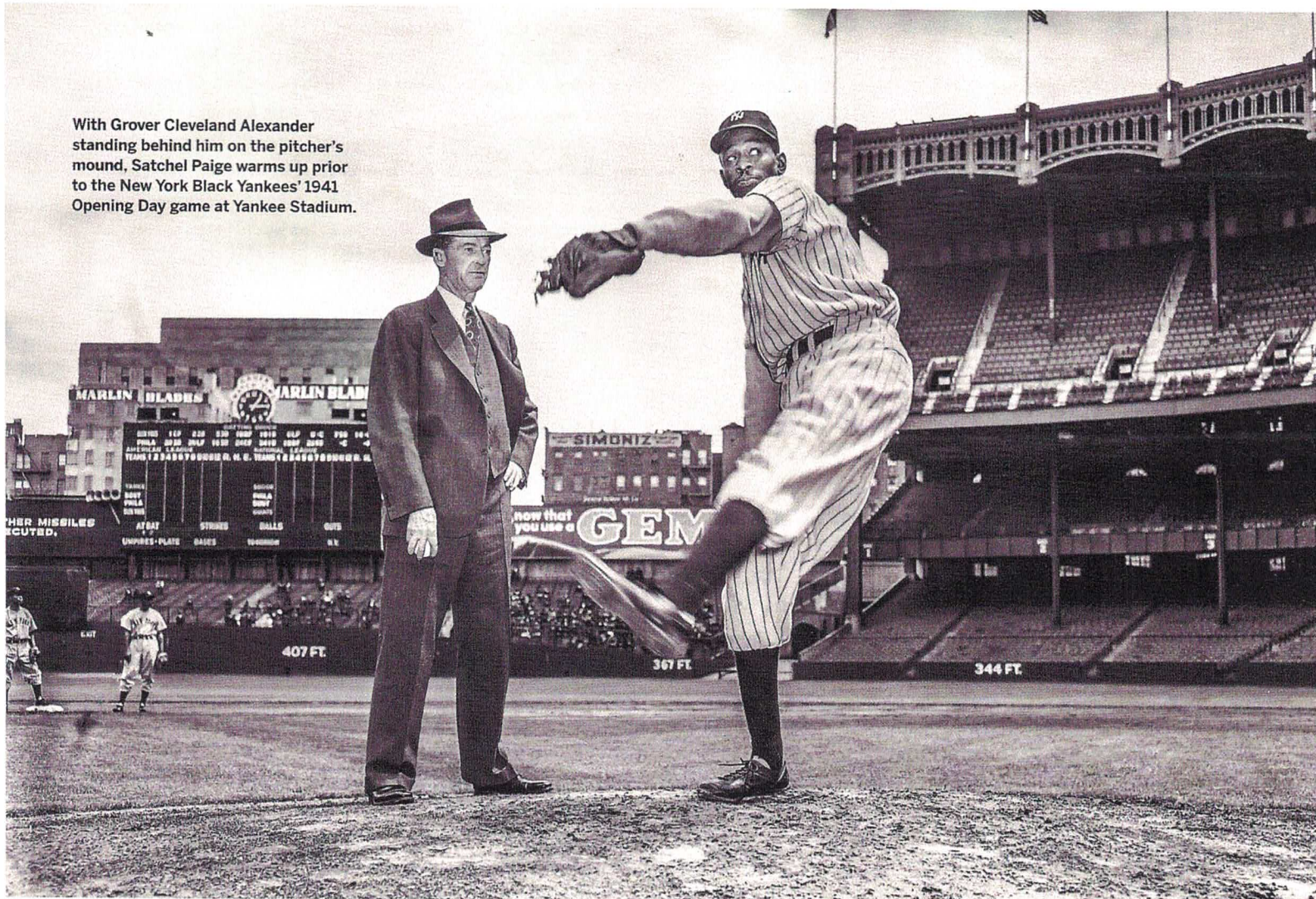
Such was the year in 1941 for James "Soldier Boy" Semler's New York Black Yankees, regular finishers at the bottom half of the Negro National League standings. In 1940, the Yanks ended up in fourth place with a 19-24 record, 10.5 games behind Vic Harris' Homestead Grays.

But on this day, the Black Yankees were at baseball's iconic green cathedral: Yankee Stadium. The tall, tan, talkative, talented and sometimes truculent ace, Satchel Paige, was headed to the Big Apple to rejuvenate a struggling franchise. He had been banned in 1938 for contract-jumping and had been out of the majors (playing in Mexico with a sore arm) until returning with the Kansas City Monarchs in 1940.

Paige was known as much for his crowd-pleasing charisma and phenomenal longevity and resiliency as for his legendary athletic achievements on pitching mounds all over the Western Hemisphere. In pool halls, barber shops and juke joints nationwide, Paige was arguably the most famous Black athlete in America — save for heavyweight champion Joe Louis. Paige was on loan from J.L. Wilkinson's Monarchs for the Opening Day doubleheader against the Philadelphia Stars on Sunday, May 11, 1941.



With Grover Cleveland Alexander standing behind him on the pitcher's mound, Satchel Paige warms up prior to the New York Black Yankees' 1941 Opening Day game at Yankee Stadium.



Reports suggest Paige received a \$500 appearance fee.

Four days later, Joe DiMaggio would begin his legendary 56-game hitting streak with a single off Eddie Smith of the Chicago White Sox. But five years earlier, the Yankees wanted to test their promising prospect to see if he was ready for the big leagues.

On Feb. 7, 1936, in Oakland, Calif., playing for Dick Bartell's All-Stars, the 21-year-old DiMaggio faced off against Paige and his All-Stars. In four at-bats, DiMaggio managed to get a bloop infield hit. At the time, DiMaggio called Paige "the best and fastest pitcher I ever faced." Unfortunately, we'll never know if Paige could have interrupted DiMaggio's hitting streak in 1941.

Prior to throwing out the first pitch, New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia got a photo opportunity with the high-kicking, newly pinstriped veteran. The popular and

diminutive mayor — he stood 5-foot-2 — would later create the Mayor's Committee to Integrate Baseball in October 1945, right after Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to a Montreal Royals contract on Oct. 23 of that year.

Amid the backdrop of World War II in Europe, an estimated 20,000 fans joined the pageantry on Opening Day 1941 with an appearance by the old Harlem Hellfighters — now recommissioned as the 369th Coast Artillery (Anti-Aircraft) — coming 300 miles from upstate Fort Ontario (Oswego, N.Y.), marching in with a 65-piece drum-and-bugle corps in full uniform. Super fans spotted future Hall of Famers Smokey Joe Williams and Grover Cleveland Alexander in the stands.

Paige opened the game by striking out Philadelphia shortstop Mahlon Duckett and left fielder Roy Parnell. He would face 36 batters, striking out eight, giving up five hits, two walks and allowing three runs in

the Black Yankees' 5-3 victory over Joe Fillmore and the Stars. Paige's catcher, Johnny Hayes, hit a home run in the eighth inning to break a 3-3 tie. With the marketing mission accomplished, Paige returned to Kansas City and started 11 games and completed two of them en route to a 7-0 record as the Monarchs again took first place in the Negro American League. (No Negro Leagues World Series was played that year.)

Fast-forward to 1946 as America was putting World War II in the rear-view mirror. Emerging from the chaos was a veteran from the integrated Overseas Invasion Service Expedition (OISE) All-Star Baseball team. This team competed in the European Theater of Operations World Series against the 71st Infantry Division, which featured many major leaguers. An estimated 50,000 spectators watched the games, held at Nuremberg Stadium in Germany. In Game 2 of the series, pitcher Leon Day showcased



his talent with a 2-1 victory, allowing only four hits and striking out 10 batters.

This all-star came from the segregated 818th Amphibian Battalion and was now returning to the states to open the season for Effa Manley's Newark Eagles against the Philadelphia Stars.

Manley didn't allow just anyone to open the season for the eventual Negro National League champions. Day's résumé shows that on July 31, 1942, he struck out 18 Baltimore Elite Giants batters after giving up a lead-off single to Pee Wee Butts, tying Bob Feller's major league record for strikeouts in a game. The Elite Giants' lineup featured heavy hitters in the 3-4-5 positions: George Scales, Roy Campanella and Wild Bill Wright. Day, a solid hitter himself, batted in the sixth spot and went 1-for-4 with two RBI. The Eagles won, 8-1, with Day throwing a one-hitter. Overall, he had nine other major league games with double-digit strikeouts.

Of note, the most productive pitcher in the history of the East-West Classic All-Star Game was "Low-key Leon." He is the all-time leader in strikeouts (14) and innings pitched (21.1). His strikeouts per nine innings ratio in all-star competition is higher than Paige's. In

the 1942 Classic (the first of two games that year), he faced seven batters and struck out five of them, giving up no walks and no hits. The quiet and modest Day struck out the side (John "Buck" O'Neil and pinch hitters Art "Superman" Pennington and Lloyd "Ducky" Davenport) in the ninth inning, losing a chance to add to his strikeout string only because the game ended. His East squad won, 5-2, with Paige taking the loss for the West squad.

Day was such a dominating pitcher in 1942 and 1943 that the *Pittsburgh Courier* ranked him ahead of Paige as the best ace in the game, stating: "Leon Day is the best pitcher in the Negro baseball...despite the fact he is used daily either as a pitcher, outfielder or infielder." A calm technician with a bulldog attitude toward winning ball games, Day was equally feared as a hitter.

After missing two-and-a-half competitive years due to military service, the 29-year-old Day returned to the majors to face the Stars on May 5, 1946. In 1940, Bob Feller of the Cleveland Indians had thrown an Opening Day no-hitter. Day matched Feller's historic feat with no Star reaching second base. He faced 29 batters, struck out six and walked one while surviving two fielding errors by

teammates. With 8,514 fans on hand at Ruppert Stadium in New Jersey, the Eagles defeated the Stars, 2-0.

During the game, Day injured his arm on a fielding play. Despite the lingering injury, he compiled a 13-2 record — with 14 complete games in 15 starts and a 2.39 ERA — to lead the Eagles to the World Series against the Monarchs.

The hard-throwing right hander, without a wind-up, mesmerized batters with his arsenal of assorted pitches. Known to short-arm his pitches, which made the ball appear quicker to the plate, Day had a blazing fastball and a snapping curve.

Former Elite Giants catcher Frazier Robinson, in an interview with author Paul Archer, remembers Day: "He had an unusual delivery. What he would do was bring the right hand up and it would look like the ball was coming out of his ear. He'd throw it from there. He never did go up and come down with the ball. He'd just go up with the ball and here it comes and you best be ready. It'd look like he'd short arm it, but he threw with his whole body and got a lot of power out of his legs. That's what was doing it. It was those legs. As you can imagine, with no windup it was hard to steal on Leon. Plus he was quick and had a good pickoff move. And then when he did turn the ball loose, he'd have the ball in the catcher's hand before the runner had three or four steps. That's the kind of pitcher that a catcher loves to catch."

Paige was the elongated, lanky legend with ski-sized shoes and the wingspan of a wandering albatross, presenting an imposing image to batters whenever the famed pitcher appeared on the mound. Day, on the other hand, was an artist. Much like Claude Monet, the French impressionist painter, Day had a remarkable palette of pitches. Similar to Monet's soft, textured paintings of water lilies, Day possessed a calming, subtle and soft-spoken nature on the mound.

Satchel was tall and thin; Leon was short and stocky. Satchel was boastful and flamboyant; Leon was quiet and modest. Paige hit like a pitcher and Day hit like a hitter.

And both men were at their best on Opening Day. ●

New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia (center) chats with Satchel Paige on Opening Day 1941 at Yankee Stadium.



Larry Lester is a curatorial consultant for the Hall of Fame's ongoing Black Baseball Initiative.