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Fifty Years of Dazzling, Dizzying Threads: Anniversary of Pittsburgh Pirates Debuting Double-Knits July 1970.

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ABSTRACT

This article was originally accepted for presentation at the Baseball in Literature and Culture Conference at Ottawa University in Ottawa, Kansas, in April 2020 (conference cancelled due to Covid-19 outbreak) and presented virtually (via Zoom) for the 37th Sports Literature Association Conference, Virtual Edition June 19, 2020. This article commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Pittsburgh Pirates, when debuting in Three Rivers Stadium fifty years ago July 16, 1970, making a fashion statement in their new uniforms that would change the look of the game as much as the multi-purpose stadiums and artificial surface fields Major Leaguers played on. Their white double-knit uniforms would spark a revolution in uniform design soon to be adopted by all the Major League teams within a couple years. Their uniform's nylon-cotton blend fabric changed the look of Major League Baseball at a time when advancements in textile technology combined with a freer spirit in graphics experimentation allowed for bold—and sometimes wild—fashion designs not seen before in professional sports. Several books along with news and commercial web sites/sources are referenced to confirm information in the article.

Keywords: Major League Baseball Uniforms, Sports and Fashion History, History of Sports Design, Sport Uniform Fabrics.

INTRODUCTION: A SUMMER NIGHT FOR NEW THINGS

In mid-July this year, the Pittsburgh Pirates will celebrate a unique anniversary that changed the look of baseball. July 16 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Pirates debuting in their former home that they shared with the Steelers, Three Rivers Stadium. As progressively modern as the new stadium looked, on that same evening the Bucs also donned new tight-fitting uniforms that seemed equally suited for a New York fashion show as they did a baseball stadium: a pull-over sleeved jersey and elastic waistband pants that were white with mustard yellow, white, and black piping on the waist, sleeves, and neck, the pants fastening only with buttons (Lukas, 2010) rather than requiring belt loops for a belt. The hat was also changed to a mustard yellow cap with a black P and a black bill.

On that mid-summer night, the Pirates would transform the look of baseball. Much as club owners and cities had been changing the look of the game by building multi-purpose stadiums with artificial playing surfaces, the Pirates' uniform kick-started what would become a revolution in uniform

design—in some cases eye-assaulting as I'll later discuss—as teams rushed to update their looks and fit in with the soon-to-be swingin', disco 70s.

Fans in attendance that night in Three Rivers were probably even more delighted given their already awed feeling of being in a new, state-of-the-art sports facility. In fact, one fan (as cited in Lukas, 2010) that evening, then a pre-teen, noticed immediately:

> *The Pirates came out for BP in their old uniforms . . . . We didn't see the new ones until Dock [Ellis] went out to warm up. I absolutely noticed the difference. It was exciting, because it was all part of this 'moving into the future' thing. In 1970 we were all a lot more optimistic.*

A HOT TREND

The other MLB teams were quick to adopt the new threads. The Pirates wore the new uniforms through the second half of the '70 season and all through the '71 season, including the World Series when they defeated the Baltimore Orioles. One source claims and a *YouTube* video appears to show that the Orioles, the defending world series champions from 1970, transitioned to the double knits during the '71 season (Classic MLB1, 2019; Steinle, 2019). The other teams soon followed. By 1972, all but a handful of Major League teams had switched over to the newly designed synthetics (Steinle, 2019). And in '73, all had switched (Lukas, 2010; Steinle, 2019). I'm sure—besides the viewers—the networks, MLB, and the other team owners were quick to take note of those stylish 1970 Buccos and wanted to re-fashion their players.

WHY THEN?

Why did the synthetic blends take off so quickly after the Pirates introduced them? One reason is they looked good on TV. Because the networks had better camera technology by the late 60s/early 70s, they were broadcasting crisper images that were also in color. The synthetic blends appeared brighter, and the tighter-fitting uniforms made the players' fit physiques look better too.

Another reason why the synthetic blends probably caught on quickly is that the Pirates had become a contender. They would win the eastern division in the newly reformatted divisional playoff structure Major League Baseball had expanded to just the year before, and do it five of the next six seasons. Contenders make anything look good.

Because of the team's success in those first three years of the 70's, hall of famer Roberto Clemente would get exposure to a national audience that he hadn't received during the sixties in those first two and half years the team wore the uniform—particularly for his phenomenal MVP performance in the '71 Series. It's ironic too, since many of the pictures of Clemente have him wearing the synthetic blend uniform despite his wearing the Pirates flannel vest uniform for most of his career. I'm sure the biggest reason the owners switched over was the players liked the uniform's feel (not always the look, depending on the design). Going back to the days of Ruth and Gehrig, players were wearing wool uniforms. During the hot summer, those uniforms soaked up the sweat and were just darn hot. Then came flannels that were a bit better, but still could be uncomfortable in ninety-degree heat. By the time the Pirates adopted their version of the synthetic threads, all teams' uniforms were a form of synthetic material, but didn't have nylon that made the Pirates uniform light and stretchy (Lukas, 2010), and that's what made the difference.

Their version felt better during those dog days. Pirates hall of fame second baseman Bill Mazeroski said that during training camp in 1970 when the Pirates organization was in the stages of readying the new uniforms for debut, he and Clemente were asked to wear them to see how they felt. Maz (as cited in *Story of the '71 Pirates*) explained he and Clemente liked the uniform fit:

> *"Everything just stretched with you . . . a lot lighter . . . didn't hold in the sweat . . . not heavy on you or nothing . . . and it was perfect. We really liked them."*

In fact, wearing the double knit uni made the difference in one player's being able to play at all a few years later. In spring training 1972, Ken Singleton, then with the Montreal Expos, was allergic to some element of the material in the older uniform and was forced to wear the Expo's new uniform before his teammates did (Lukas, 2006; Gruver, p.87; Wong and Grob, p. 275). Owners obviously felt a more comfortable player—particularly one not breaking out in a rash—would probably play better if he felt better.

WHY THE PIRATES?

Why didn't the synthetic blend appear before the Pirates did it? Good question. Synthetic fibers had been around for a while. They were invented back in the later1800s and had progressed in development through the first half of the 20th Century. By the late 50s synthetic blends were being used in football uniforms (*Uni Watch*, 2019). One uniform dealer expert thinks baseball was late to adopt synthetic blends because of the league's stubborn tradition to change (*Uni Watch*, 2019).

So, why the Pirates as opposed to, say, the Reds? Their River Front Stadium, the same construction concept as Three Rivers, opened only a couple weeks before (Cozzi, 2002), but no fresh new synthetics adorned Rose, Bench, or Perez of what would become Cincinnati's Big Red Machine, as can be seen in photos and clips of the All-Star Game that Cincinnati hosted in River Front when Pete Rose crashed into Ray Fosse—both wearing flannels.

It seems a marketing guy from the Pittsburgh firm connected to the development of the graphics for Three Rivers Stadium may have spurred the idea (Lukas, 2010). He suggested to Pirates General Manager Joe L. Brown that the team should have new uniforms to go along with the new stadium (Lukas, 2010). This guy then teamed up with Rawlings, with Rawlings likely suggesting the new fabric, Brown and the other Pirate high brass liking it, and the uniform development went from there.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BUCS' DOUBLE-KNITS

It can't be understated how the Pirates' uniforms revolutionized uniform looks from that point forward. As stated earlier, the nylon-cotton blend looked brighter and better on the players, so that obviously improved the look of the game. Also, because the seventies saw a revolution in visual graphics in all industries, the fabric needed to realize such graphic experimentation in fashion finally existed. The style of jerseys and pants could now be explored in ways never before tried.

A good example of this graphic design explosion as an "assault" on the eye is the rainbow design of the 1975 Houston Astros uniforms —that married hippie tie-dye with space age. The Astros jersey was white on the shoulders and upper chest, then had orange and yellow horizontal stripes around the sleeves and around the torso from the chest down to the waist. "Astros" black lettering appeared in the white just above the first stripe, and a solid big, black star was placed on the left side over the

stripes. All that heavy graphics meant the player number had to be placed on the upper right thigh pant leg. It was the most incredible look for a professional sport team uniform at the time. Yet, such a design would not have been possible without synthetic materials.

Paul Lukas, who writes for *ESPN* and *Uni Watch* and is an expert on team uniforms, explains (as cited in Rajan, 2017) the importance synthetic fabrics had on uniform design like the Astros:

> *That rainbow pattern the Astros wore literally could not have been done prior to 1970 or 1971. The technology did not exist in the fabrics that were being used at the time to create that kind of design. Even if somebody had wanted to do something like that, it couldn't have been done. And I don't think it would've occurred to anybody to try to do that.*

As if not to be upstaged by the Astros, the Pirates again transformed uniform fashion by creating the mix-an'-match style that went a little farther from what Charlie Finley did for the Oakland A's in 1972 (Green and Lanius, p. 158). For the 1977 season that was popularized by the "We Are Family" world champion Bucs of '79, the Pirates donned a uniform combo that consisted of all black, all yellow, and striped jerseys and pants, creating nine possible outfits. On top of that, Pirate hall of fame slugger Willie Stargell handed out his snazzy, yellow "Stargell Stars" to his teammates for their outstanding performance on the field that they proudly tacked on to their striped pillbox ball caps. The explosion of dazzling uniform design would wane by the end of the eighties, with the nineties seeing a movement back to traditional looks of the 40s and 50s. Yet, the material which those later traditional styles were (and still are) made are essentially the same as the Pirates' 1970 double knits.

CONCLUSION: THOSE OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER THE NEW HIPPIE THREADS

Baseball fans old enough to remember the early 70s and the new looks on the major league ball diamonds and everywhere else will never forget those bleach white Pirates on the green carpet of Three Rivers Stadium in the middle of the summer of '70.

Postscript

Other notable Pirate events while wearing the white double-knits:

- [Just prior to the double knits debut] June 12, 1970, Doc Ellis' claim to have pitched an LSD-induced no-hitter at San Diego against the Padres.
- September 2, 1970, Gene Alley hits an inside-the-park grand slam home run against Montreal at Jarry Park.
- September 1, 1971, the Pirates field the first all minority lineup.
- '71 Season: Willie Stargell wins first home run title hitting 48.
- October 13, 1971, Game 4 of the World Series at Three Rivers Stadium is the first night game in series history.
- September 20, 1972, Roberto Clemente gets his 3,000th hit vs. the Mets.
- 73' Season: Willie Stargell wins second home run title hitting 44.
- September 16, 1975, Rennie Stennett goes 7-for-7 against the Chicago Cubs at Wrigley.
- August 9, 1976, John Candelaria pitches a no-hitter in Three Rivers Stadium against the Los Angeles Dodgers.

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