



Semi-retired Mitchell wants to go back to the speed limit in writing

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Never used to puttering around as a place kicker, teacher or sportswriter, Fred Mitchell would like to put a little more pedal to his personal metal.

“I’m still trying to figure out my life routine, because I was so accustomed for 41 years having a busy schedule covering every sport imaginable,” said the retired Chicago Tribune jack of all trades scribe.

“It’s quite difficult going from 100 mph to 10 mph. I would like to figure out something I can do to get me into a routine at 65 mph.”

A year and a half after retiring from the Tribune, Mitchell enjoys the majority of evenings off in the company of wife Kim. He writes a blog at www.FredMitchellWriter.com. He can always pen another book with already 11 to his credit. Mitchell can actively help out younger athletes who followed in his path of collegiate achiever who knew he had to get a real job after graduation. More importantly, he can certainly advise prospective sportswriters to perhaps consider another career.

If you think Gary, Ind. native Mitchell, who grew up with Chicago sports, was fortunate in his four-decade run at Tribune Tower, then you must add that quality to his ability to pull the plug voluntarily. Too many people with Mitchell’s experience and institutional memory simply have been cast aside, outright laid off or forcibly retired, in a media jobs bloodletting that could not have been worse in the Great Depression.

The first African-American sportswriter at the Tribune, hired in the late spring of 1974, Mitchell officially retired Nov. 25, 2015. Going against the grain in the 21st century, he attained the privilege of jumping before he was pushed.

“That was an important part of my decision,” he said. “I wanted to be able to go out on my own terms. I’ve seen so many people who have had long, successful careers have it end on a negative note. You tend to live with that. It was very important to leave on a positive note, to have no hard feelings.”



Fred and Kim Mitchell (second from left) join Jill and Bob Costas at a recent event.

Mitchell could surely write book No. 12 on his own journey, from Gary to the temporary right-field stands for Bears games at Wrigley Field, then to Wittenberg University in Ohio, a teaching gig near Columbus and finally as the only Tribune writer to work as the beat man for the Cubs, Bears and Bulls in his career.

The feature-story version of the Mitchell saga here classifies him as a second-generation trailblazer African-American.

Dad was achiever in steel industry

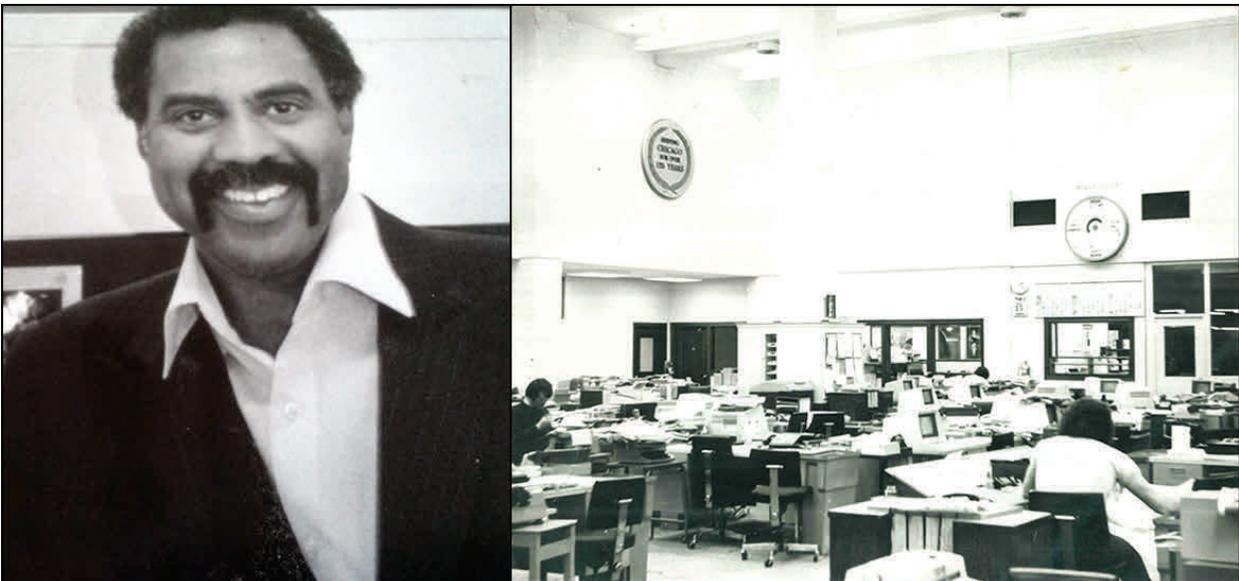
Son of Leroy and Esther Mitchell, he channeled his sports genes from his father. LeRoy Mitchell, Jr., an avid Cincinnati Reds fan, had played at the University of Cincinnati and later for the Cincinnati Mangrums, a semi-pro team. He advanced at Inland Steel to what his son believed to be the first African-American to head the labor relations department of a major U.S. steel company. LeRoy Mitchell, Jr. represented the company in contract negotiations, labor grievances and arbitration hearings.

Dad was just as busy off the job. Leroy Mitchell, Jr. was involved in the Gary Urban League, Gary School Board, First Baptist Church deacon board and the Indiana Chapter of the American Lung Association (as president). On Sundays, the family had five season tickets to Bears games at Wrigley Field. Brothers Bud and Steve joined Fred and their parents.

Fred and his brothers were young achievers. After skipping fifth grade, he'd go on to graduate Tolleston High School at 16.

"I lettered in football, baseball and track," Mitchell said. "I led the team in hitting (.382) as a junior second baseman. I ran the sprints and 880 relay in track and became the first kicking specialist in school history, if not state of Indiana history. My football coach, Bob Stearnes, discovered me kicking in gym class as a 14-year-old sophomore and immediately put me on the varsity.

"Steve was an all-state football and baseball player at Bishop Noll in Hammond. He later played both sports at Butler University and was inducted into their Hall of Fame in



Fred Mitchell (left) early in his Tribune career. He worked in a brightly-lit city room-sports department with teletypes and police radios as the soundtracks.

2010. He was an outfielder (27-game hitting streak for the school record) and pitcher at Butler.

“He threw a one-hitter against Valparaiso. The only hit was a disputed infield grounder in the hole at short. The throw to first was low and got away and could have been ruled an error. The Valpo hitter was (fellow Gary product and future Cub) Lloyd McClendon. I have joked with McClendon over the years about that disputed infield hit.”

Mitchell’s first writing experience was editor-in-chief of Tolleston’s school newspaper and yearbook. He also worked for Inland Steel’s “The Steelmaker” company newspaper in the summer between his junior and senior year. And he doubled up as varsity kicker and sports editor of the Torch paper at Wittenberg. Like Irv Kupcinec as an NFL ref, he got to perform in games and then write about it. Mitchell did not lack for self-newsmaking, setting a national record for collegiate kickers at Wittenberg.



Fred Mitchell works on his 1980s-vintage laptop hammering out a Cubs story as team media relations director Bob Ibach leans over in the pressbox.

“I wrote a column called: ‘From the Bench,’” Mitchell said. “My Hall of Fame coach Bill Edwards once called me the ‘Grantland Rice’ of Wittenberg after I questioned his decision to go for a touchdown instead of a field goal during our only loss of the season in 1966 -- 14-7 at Akron.

For five years right out of Wittenberg, Mitchell taught English at Grove City High School in Grove City, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus. He also coached football (assistant varsity, head junior varsity coach), track (head coach) and wrestling (assistant). Three of his former football players reached at least the training-camp level in the NFL: defensive lineman Gary Burley (Bengals and Falcons), running back

Bob Hitchens and running back Steve Schnarr. Burley played 10 NFL years, nine with the Bengals, including their only Super Bowl appearance. Hitchens, who was his college's all-time leading rusher, is one of only three people to have their number retired at Miami of Ohio. The other two are John Pont and Ben Rothlisberger.

Mitchell also played semi-pro football for the Columbus Bucks in the early 1970s. The Bucks had eight members from the national-champion 1968 Ohio State football team under Woody Hayes.

He picked up additional writing experience for community newspapers in Chicago’s south suburbs, and had penned free-lance pieces for the Saturday Evening Post and other publications. Restless for a different opportunity, Mitchell left Grove City High School in 1974. He was not thrilled with job offers in the corporate world at Quaker Oats and the Northern Trust Bank. Bill Lowry, an executive understudy to Leroy Mitchell, Jr. at Inland Steel, had a high profile in the Chicago media market as host of WBBM-TV’s “Opportunity Line,” a weekend jobs show. He asked Mitchell what job he desired rather than the 9 to 5 downtown corporate world.

Bill Lowry recommended him to Tribune

"I really want to be a sportswriter, but that is probably not a possibility," Mitchell replied. "Lowry then got on the phone and found out there was an opening on the Tribune sports copy desk. So I went for an interview with sports editor Cooper Rollow, and later submitted samples of my previously published work. That, coupled with my experience as a school journalist, an English teacher, coach and athlete got my foot in the door.

"I paid my dues early on by working difficult hours, including a whole year from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. for the overnight shift at the Tribune."

The Tribune hired few staffers with minimal experience. Hot-shot young reporter Lee Strobel was paid company minimum -- \$274 a week. "Sounds about right," Mitchell said of his own starting weekly paycheck.

The Tribune's night side in the summer of 1974, as the nation awaited the fate of Watergate-hobbled President Richard Nixon, was an interesting place. The sports department was tucked in a corner of a huge city room, illuminated with huge fluorescent bulbs compared to the more dimly-lit newsroom of 2017. Teletype machines and police radios provided a constant soundtrack. Yells of "copy" punctuated the night from the assorted desks.

Another uncommon Tribune hire fresh out of college – the University of Chicago – was future Barack Obama advisor David Axelrod. He worked general assignment along with present-day syndicated columnist Clarence Page. Movie critic Gene Siskel would arrive after a preview, alternating writing his review and dozing on the manual typewriter at 15-minute intervals until he'd finally finish around dawn.

In the sports department, a symbol of a kind of smug satisfaction at their employment was sported by many staffers – dirigible-sized cigars of the type smoked by Jerry Reinsdorf. The stogies looked out of place on younger guys like deskman Tom Dunn and interns such as Joel Bierig. Mitchell never smoked and thus did not pick up the questionable habit.

"Ed Stone comes to mind," Mitchell recalled of a veteran, old-school stogie-chomper. Stone was a crack reporter who once was kicked off the Chicago's American Bears beat through the interference of George Halas. Papa Bears was buddies with longtime Tribune editor Don Maxwell, did not like Stone's second-guessing of Halas' quarterback choices and pressured Chicago American's editor Luke Carroll for Stone to be re-assigned to the office in favor of a young Brent Musburger.

"There were a lot of old-school sportswriters," Mitchell said. "It wasn't uncommon to look in a desk drawer to see a bottle of whiskey or free tickets to Cubs or Sox games. It was a much different atmosphere."



Fred Mitchell crossed paths with Mr. Cub, Ernie Banks (right), over four decades at the Tribune.

Even more so than Mitchell's stickout as a non-smoker was the color of his skin. The Tribune had done some hiring of African-American staffers under editor Clayton Kirkpatrick starting in 1969. Page was one. Photographer Ovie Carter won the Pulitzer Prize in tandem with reporter William Mullen in 1975. Fellow photog Gerald West worked that night shift. But Mitchell broke the color line in the sports department. Another black staffer would not join him until former Bulls beat writer Larry Casey moved over from the afternoon Tribune Co.-owned Chicago Today, which folded in Sept. 1974.

He got through 'uncomfortable times'

"It was curious to me that I was the first African-American sportswriter at the Tribune in 1974 and baseball was integrated 27 years before," Mitchell said.

"There were some uncomfortable times. But at the same time, I tried not to focus on that, because paranoia can destroy you. I was all about learning the business professionally. I tried to align myself with people who were helpful and had my best intentions in mind, and try to ignore people who perhaps didn't have my best intentions in mind. That's the only way to handle a situation like that."



Fred Mitchell speaks to attendees at the Chicago Baseball Museum's 100th birthday party for Hall of Famer Buck O'Neil in 2011.

Mitchell's work ethic enabled him to get through both the trailblazer status and the overnight page-makeup job, working with printers still toiling with linotype machines. Eventually he moved off the desk and onto the Bulls beat, covering a tail-ending team in the pre-Michael Jordan era.

He got a big break when, trying to take about three weeks' vacation after covering the Lakers-76ers NBA Finals in 1983, sports editor George Langford asked him to take over

the Cubs beat immediately, at mid-season. Mitchell endured a trial-by-fire as manager Lee Elia's job hung in the balance with the typical second-half Cubs nosedive. Mitchell had to write negatives. "That was a tough way to break into the beat," he said. Elia was fired in mid-August, but he had no hard feelings dealing with Mitchell over ensuing decades.

The 1984 Cubs would become Mitchell's favorite beat among the three teams he covered daily.

"That (first-place) season was totally unexpected," he said. "They were coming off a fifth-place finish, and had a horrible spring training with fights among the players. You had to be on your toes every day. There were big trades. That was a special year."

As the 1980s ebbed, Mitchell shifted over to the Bears, enduring a lingering hangover from Super Bowl XX. He had a unique way of connecting with Mike Ditka as a time Da Coach widened his gulf with the majority of media.

"We were in (training camp) at Platteville, at a restaurant, and Mike was there with his secretary," he said. "I came in with a couple of other sportswriters and sat at the bar. I talked to him, and share with him that I grew up in a steel city in Gary, so I could relate to Aliquippa (Pa.), where he grew up. And I also saw him play at Wrigley Field. He kind of dropped his guard. I saw a different side of him. I also told him about Ron Duncan, who played at Wittenberg, and then he was with Eagles when Mike was traded there from the Bears."

Mitchell went on to a personality-oriented daily sports column, takeout features and serving as the paper's utility writer, covering everything. He circled back to weekend baseball writing. Again, he was a pace-setter in 2010.

First one at Chicago stadiums with flip-cam

"One thing I prided myself was to keep up with technology and advances," he said. "In some cases, be the forerunner. Anything that can enable me to my job better, easier, quicker, I'm all for it."

"I was the first at the Tribune to use a flip-cam. My colleagues looked at me strangely, what are you doing? I felt that this was coming, and now just about everyone is required to do it (via smart phones). My reasoning was it provided a safety net as journalists and persons being interviewed. We've all written provocative stories where the subject denied saying the things he did. Now with both audio and video, it protects both parties."

On the back nine of his career and beyond, Mitchell hardly lacked for honors. He was inducted into Wittenberg's Hall of Fame in 1995, the American Football Association Minor League Football Hall of Fame in 1999 and the American Football Kicking Hall of Fame in 2013.

In addition, in 2000, Wittenberg endowed the Fred Mitchell Scholarship, which goes to the upperclass student who best combines athletic and journalistic accomplishments.

In 2009, the National Football Foundation named its annual national college kicking award after Mitchell. Each year, the best kicker from among 750 non-FBS colleges are

eligible for the Fred Mitchell Award. The Selection Committee for the award includes dozens of Pro Football and College Football Hall of Famers, including Kevin Butler, Gale Sayers, Steve McMichael, Marv Levy, Bob Thomas and Nick Lowery.

So Mitchell can never feel, a la Nixon, that the public doesn't have him to kick around anymore. His name emblazoned on awards, his books and the millions of words he wrote over four decades won't go away anytime soon.