

Red Sox fans want Mo of the same

From the throats of 34,000 fans, a chant: "Mo, Mo, Mo, Mo."

Last year, Boston fans might have been calling for the meanest of the Three Stooges to poke the Red Sox in the eyes.

This year they are calling for Maurice Samuel Vaughn to knock the cover off of the baseball. A 225-pound lefthanded-hitting first baseman, Vaughn generates Mo electricity when he strides to the plate, flicking his bat like a toothpick. Only Vaughn gets the undivided attention of the fans. Nobody else is even close.

"Even when he was struggling last year the fans wanted him to do well," General Manager Lou Gorman says. "He has charisma. There's something about him."

Vaughn got a standing O after his fourth hit against the Indians on April 14.

Through the first 24 games, he was hitting .395, with 10 doubles, 4 home runs and 16 RBIs. His third home run, in Anaheim, was the stuff of legend: Before the game,

Vaughn had talked on the telephone with Jason Leader, a young cancer patient at Children's Hospital in Boston. Vaughn had promised Leader he would hit a home run for him.

As Spike Lee might say, Mo is playing Mo Better Baseball. Mo hits, Mo RBIs and Mo fun.

"I like it," says Vaughn of the fans. "They push me to do better."

"Baseball is fun when you are winning and you are doing what you are supposed to do. It's hard work, but it's fun, too. This year has been a lot of fun."

The Mo Vaughn saga started a couple of seasons ago when Vaughn, in his fourth game, hit a 438-foot home run in Baltimore that missed by five rows being only the second ball to get out of Memorial Stadium. The clout suggested the arrival of a new Reggie Jackson, but in fact Vaughn's swing was, and is, geared to hitting line drives. Looking back, Vaughn now realizes that the home run threw him off his stride until the latter part of last season. He finished 1992 at .234 with 13 homers and 57 RBIs.

"You're a young guy, and you hit a ball almost out of the stadium... 22 years old... you think you're going to hit balls like that the whole rest of your career. You start swinging harder and harder and harder, and the ball travels less and less and less."

The Sox designated Vaughn as a spring project. Hitting coach Mike Easler went to work on him. And in the field, Vaughn used a small-sized glove with short fingers to improve his concentration and cut down on the mental lapses that led to 15 errors last season. The effort paid off: Vaughn had a massive spring — .403, 6 home runs, 23 RBIs — and no longer was letting throws get past him. The hot bat and solid glove followed him north; he didn't miss a throw until game 14.

Vaughn says of himself now, "If I stay focused, I can hit 20 home runs and drive in over 100 and still hit .300. I have a line-drive swing with power, not a home-run swing. I just want my hits. The prettiest swing is to the opposite field."

—STEVE MARANTZ

Red Sox's three-game sweep of the Angels that propelled them into a first-place tie with the Tigers.

Although cause and effect inevitably are blurred when winning and losing are dissected, most observers lay at least part of the early success to a team approach that subsumes individual egos. Even when they went into their tailspin, there was no finger-pointing.

"We're going to surprise some people," Viola says. "We might have had a losing streak on this trip, but we didn't bury our heads. We didn't get down on ourselves."

Chill the whine

The clubhouse atmosphere is unusual by modern Red Sox standards: nonconfrontational and noncomplaining. The players sound like the Up-With-Milk Chorus, cheerful and selfless, sincere, kind, reverent and courteous. It's a bit disorienting (nauseating?) for reporters, particularly those accustomed to last year's clubhouse, described by one as "clinically depressed." Boggs, Reed and Burks wanted out for financial reasons, Clark had fallen into bankruptcy because of profligate spending and Young, who couldn't get an out, was a \$3.5-million symbol of Gorman's empty optimism. At the low point, Boggs and Clemens were at each other's throats over the scoring on a ground ball; Boggs didn't want to be charged with an error, and Clemens didn't want to be credited with an earned run.

But the chemistry has smoothed out with the arrival of Dawson, Fletcher, Calderon and hitting coach Mike Easler, all of whom came with stamps of good character.

"Last year we had some guys who didn't want to be here, and that brings everybody down," Darwin says. "This year we've got a bunch of guys pulling for each other. Nobody is thinking about their stats. The only stat is winning."

"Everybody is pushing each other to play better," Vaughn says, "and when you have that, you're going to have a good team. We've got our leaders — Mike Greenwell, Roger Clemens, Tony Pena, Andre Dawson. They lead by example, and everybody follows suit."

Nobody appears more pleased than Gorman, a man who sees silver linings in the dimmest fog. A couple of Gorman's deals had turned him into one of New England's favorite punching bags, despite his successes — a pennant in 1986 and division titles in '88 and '90. He was openly ridiculed for the Young fiasco and to a lesser degree for Clark. He was criticized for not signing Kirby Puckett and Tom Henke, and when he signed Dawson, whose 38-year-old knees are going on 58, it was feared Gorman had brought in another over-the-hill slugger. Gorman assured the public everything was proceeding according to his long-range building plan.

"I hate people who are negative," Gorman says. "I hate being around people who are negative. I hate the thought of negativity. Negative people drag me down. In the worst moment I try to find something good. Last year, the last three weeks were the most exciting part. The kids were up, and we played like hell. If anything good came of last year, we developed some kids — (shortstop John) Valentin, Ryan, (pitcher Paul) Quantrill, (pitcher Scott) Taylor has a chance. Vaughn improved. We have another eight to 10 kids in the system who are a year to two away. That's what I'm excited about."

Mayberry RFD

The way Gorman and some of the players tell it, the team's fast start resulted from an impromptu 50-minute meeting near the end of spring camp. It took place in a dugout, with Hobson speaking first, followed by most of the players. They talked about their concerns — and hopes — and most important, in hindsight, they revealed a willingness to submerge their egos for the sake of the team.

"You find out a little more about the people you play with," Vaughn says. "You find out how good people really are around here. After that, you could see us really pull together as a team."

Says Gorman: "The next day Butch said to me, 'We got some tremendous personalities on this club. I've never been around a group with a better makeup.' That was a big moment. It seemed to turn things around dramatically."

The transformation came not a moment too soon for Hobson, whose managerial abilities were not clearly evident and even yet defy characterization. Hobson is a former Red Sox third baseman and Alabama Crimson Tide backup quarterback who doesn't always

distinguish between baseball and football. He talks of the Red Sox "putting points on the board" and each day he scratches a football term on the clubhouse blackboard, such as "fourth and 1" or "third and long." At times last year, it seemed as if Hobson got his team ready to play every seventh day. But, as Gorman says, in Hobson's defense, "Even God couldn't have managed that team."

This year, Hobson has the Sox running out of a Pro-Set, mixing up their plays, hitting hard and digging in on defense. He is substituting liberally, using his special teams and cutting down on turnovers. When the Sox hit 10-3, Hobson was asked if the fast start had made his life easier, "I'm fine," he said. "I still go home and watch Andy Griffith with my wife and baby, just like always."

The Big Easler

If Hobson has the peace of mind to enjoy the dramatic arts, it is due in large part to the contribution of Mike Easler, his hitting coach. Easler came over from Milwaukee after coaching the Brewers to a .268 team average, second best in the A.L. He says he left because he wanted total control of the hitters, and Manager Phil Garner would not give it. Hobson has.

"The hitters are mine," says Easler, who hit .293 in 14 big league seasons, including two with the Red Sox (1984 and '85). "You can't have two or three different people trying to get into the heads of the hitters. It just doesn't work."

"When I talked to Butch, I told him I had to have the attention of the hitters. He said, 'You can have them.' I think Butch is more relaxed as a manager. He doesn't have to worry about the hitting or the mental aspect. I said, 'Put the blame on me.'"

Easler preaches the virtue of patience, going with the pitch and guarding the plate with two strikes. The lefthanded hitters — Greenwell (.308, 20 RBIs), Vaughn (.395), Cooper (.356) — are the hottest of the hot, perhaps because Easler was a lefthanded hitter. At one point, the three lefties were hitting .590 (23 for 39) with runners in scoring position, good for 24 RBIs. A good number of their hits were to the opposite field.

"He knows what you go through at the plate," Vaughn says. "He understands the adjustments you need to make and how to do the mechanical things. How to take the outside pitch and go the other way. All that stuff."

Cooper, who hit .276 as a rookie last season, tells anyone who asks that no, he is not trying to replace the idiosyncratic Boggs, because after all, who could replace a five-time batting champion who eats chicken every day. He says he has benefited more from Easler's psychology than his technical instruction.

"Easler wants us to be relaxed, to go up there and have fun," Cooper says. "It has made all the difference in the world to go up there with confidence."

So what happened out West, Mike? What happened to hitting to the opposite field, going with the pitch and all those good things?

"I told our guys, 'It's not you,'" Easler says. "It's them. Good pitching."

Getting real

OK, it's early. By June, both the Red Sox and Fallon Rainbow may not know which end is up. If they are going well, the city's ingrained skepticism may be enough to pull them down. "Tough town," says White Sox catcher Carlton Fisk, who played in Boston from 1969 to '80. "When you're winning, all you're doing is peering around until you're not doing as well. Then they say, 'See, I told you you weren't that good.'"

On the other hand, the Impossible Dream Sox of 1967 were preceded by the 72-90 ninth-place Sox of 1966, and the last-to-first Braves and Twins of 1991 are too recent to forget. A quick start doesn't guarantee a miracle, but neither does it preclude one the way a bad start would have. By the same token, one lousy road trip is not ruinous, but neither does it engender confidence.

So where does that put the Red Sox? Up, down or sideways? Try straight ahead.

"If we can stay healthy and find a consistent third starter," Gorman says, "with our hitting and bullpen, I believe we're going to stay in the race all year."

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In charge: Hobson, with the help of Gorman, nipped the team's attitude problem in the bud.

MO VAUGHN will remain the linchpin for the Red Sox if he can get his personal

Mo Vaughn's world turned upside down. His Ford pickup rammed an abandoned car in a breakdown lane of I-95 between Providence and Boston. The truck flipped, concrete bit into metal and Vaughn found himself suspended by a sturdy seat belt, staring up at his shoes. Gingerly, he released himself, crawled out the passenger window and surveyed the mayhem. Vaughn saw his truck had lost its hood, and the cab was crushed. The car he hit was demolished. He took a deep breath. No blood. No broken bones. He had survived a brush with death or infirmity. Now he would have to survive scrutiny into his bachelor lifestyle, drinking habits, ponderous weight and ability to lead the Red Sox.

As camp opens this week at Fort Myers, Fla., Vaughn, 30, will be even more of a focal point than usual. He is swinging his thick bat by the grace of God and a seat belt.

"Somebody is watching over my son," Vaughn's father, Leroy, says.

But Red Sox Nation wonders if its amiable first baseman is watching over himself. In his contract year, he and the club are at a moment of reckoning. How much is he worth and for how long? In Vaughn's upside-down world, those questions

are not easily answered.

Vaughn's second life began January 9, the night he frightened New England out of its wits and sent up a flag as red as the lettering on his uniform. It wasn't only that while returning at 2 a.m. from a strip joint in Providence he crashed, failed on-scene sobriety tests and was arrested for drunken driving. It was more the emergence of a pattern. In 1995, he brawled at a Boston nightclub and missed a couple of games. Last summer, an Ohio man said Vaughn assaulted him outside a Cleveland strip joint, although prosecutors did not bring charges. Regular gossip-column sightings at the Foxy Lady, a swank Providence strip club, with accounts of \$100 bills being stuffed into G strings, fill in the gaps.

Local talk radio is buzzing with speculation about Vaughn, while beat writers, accustomed to seeing Vaughn sip scotch from a plastic cup after games, are wondering.

Vaughn declined to be interviewed, but his agent, Tom Reich, flatly denies a problem. "While Mo clearly likes interacting with his peers, etc., to the question does Mo have a problem, my answer is, unequivocally, no," Reich says.

Leroy Vaughn is cryptic. "Nobody knows the facts," he says. "Until we know the facts, it's between The Man Upstairs and Mo." Leroy adds, "Sometimes you get an omen, and you have to deal with it."

Meanwhile, Vaughn's friends are concerned. Rico Petrocelli, a former Red Sox infielder, managed Vaughn at Class AAA Pawtucket in 1991. He is not currently employed by the Red Sox, nor does he have a business relationship with Vaughn.

"Knowing Mo, because I like him a

lot, the night life is my biggest concern," Petrocelli says. "What he has done is a pattern. He has every right to go out and drink alcohol, but he has to stay away from these problems.

"He's got a responsibility to the Red Sox and his own family and the kids he works with. Responsibility means ... if there is any kind of problem and pattern, he needs to take care of it. Get help. That is my feeling. I'm not saying there is a problem, but if there is, he has to take care of it."

Little about the nocturnal habits of baseball players is new since the time of Babe Ruth, a legendary carouser linked to Vaughn through Red Sox genealogy, outgoing personality, expansive belly and the fraternity of southpaw sluggers.

Indeed, biographer Robert W. Creamer's description of Ruth at midcareer is quaintly suggestive of Vaughn: "Early in 1925 he left New York for Hot Springs for his traditional prespring training camp. He was fat. In January he weighed 256. In Hot Springs he played a little golf, jogged a little, took hot steam baths. But he also drank and ran around town with women and stayed up all night and ate like a hog. He was always on the go."

If only Vaughn's life were as simple. He parallels Ruth, and then he is somebody more modern and complex. Until his drunken-driving arrest, he was the most popular black athlete in Boston's checkered racial history, admired by fans of all colors. His popularity was built on community and clubhouse leadership.

Vaughn is an urban preacher who exhorts youth to follow the straight and narrow. He was a youth advocate

before he became a star, and he maintained his ad hoc ministry after winning the 1995 MVP and landing a three-year, \$18 million contract. He runs a youth-development program in Boston's poorest neighborhood and appears at clinics, fund-raisers and charity events in white as well as minority neighborhoods.

In uniform, Vaughn is the club's ombudsman. A year ago, he was an angry critic of general manager Dan Duquette for allowing icon Roger Clemens to depart to the Blue Jays. His opinions usually reflect his low frustration level with what heretofore has been the club's refusal to spend at a competitive level. Most fans appreciate his dogged advocacy for a contending club. Now Vaughn is damaged in both areas. It's going to be hard to deliver his "stay clean" message when a youth in the audience shouts, "Look in the mirror, Mo."

It's also going to be easier for Duquette to trade Vaughn, if a contract can't be resolved. *Boston Herald* columnist Karen Guregian writes, "(Vaughn) doesn't have the kind of fanatical fan backing he once enjoyed. His support has waned ... (Vaughn's arrest) pretty much stripped him of the hold he had on Duquette. Whether or not he is proven guilty ... it doesn't matter. Things have changed. Duquette now has the upper hand when it comes to Vaughn."

The Yankees, Orioles and Dodgers have shown interest in Vaughn in the past year. The Yankees considered trading center fielder Bernie Williams, a deal Duquette relished because Williams has a terrific glove and Vaughn led A.L. first basemen in errors (14). The Orioles were dangling Rafael Palmeiro, the Dodgers Eric Karros and a pitcher.

Duquette is rehabilitating his image after the loss of Clemens and a two-year nosedive following the 1995 A.L. East championship. He has softened his spiked hair and crawled out



STEVEN SENNE / AP

SIGN OR DEAL?
Duquette will have a decision to make.

MO-MENTUM:
It's no stretch to say Vaughn's performance this season could put Boston over the top.

ROBERT SEALE / TSN

of his media bunker. His acquisition and \$75 million signing of N.L. Cy Young winner Pedro Martinez rocked New England to its Calvinist roots. Signings of infielder John Valentin and pitchers Tim Wakefield and Tom Gordon, plus the acquisitions of catcher Jim Leyritz and reliever Dennis Eckersley, increased optimism. If Rookie of the Year Nomar Garciaparra improves even a little, he will be frightening. Righthanded starting prospect Brian Rose, 22, is ready. Fans are hopeful.

Club officials no longer speak of Boston as a "medium market." CEO John Harrington says the payroll will climb to \$50 million this season and could go to a championship-caliber \$70 million in 1999. Ticket prices rose from an average of \$17.69 to \$20.65, among baseball's highest.

Payroll must increase to compete with the Yankees, who are improved with Chuck Knoblauch at second base and Chili Davis as DH. The Orioles may have slipped a bit, losing closer Randy Myers to the Blue Jays and adding only aging Joe Carter as a righthanded DH. However, a return to health by Roberto Alomar and Brady Anderson could lift the club. The Jays might contend, with Myers closing. Jose Cruz Jr. a year older and Tony Fernandez and Jose Canseco adding offense.

Vaughn is Boston's linchpin, yet the two sides are far apart, with Vaughn asking for four to

five years at \$10 million per and Duquette offering two to three years at \$8.5 million to \$9 million, on par with deals signed by Mark McGwire and Andres Galarraga. Vaughn's three-year numbers are elite: .314, 118 home runs, 365 RBIs.

Over the same period, only Galarraga, Albert Belle, Frank Thomas, Dante Bichette, Tino Martinez and Jay Buhner have more RBIs, and only McGwire, Belle, Galarraga, Buhner and Ken Griffey Jr. have more home runs. Vaughn's three-year slugging percentage of .573 is topped only by McGwire, Thomas, Belle, Griffey, Larry Walker,

Juan Gonzalez, Mike Piazza, Barry Bonds, Edgar Martinez and Ellis Burks.

But numbers don't fully explain Vaughn's presence. Last July, Mariners lefthander Randy Johnson toted a five-game winning streak into Fenway. Johnson and Vaughn are territorial about the plate. On Vaughn's first at-bat, he took a fastball in the arm. Second time up, Vaughn bounced a single through the left side. Third at-bat, he lined a two-run home run into the center field bleachers. Boston won, 4-0.

Duquette knows Martinez could be wasted without a bona fide cleanup hitter. He knows Vaughn remains a public-relations force, albeit tarnished.

Against these factors Duquette projects Vaughn's longevity. How many good years remain, considering his age (30), body type and lifestyle? Last June, Vaughn's left knee required an arthroscopic cleanup. He rushed his recovery and returned heavier. As his production dropped, his weight attracted attention.

Estimates of Vaughn's weight vary. His optimum playing weight is said to be 235, while his Ruthian weight could be as high as 280.

In Duquette's cold calculation, Vaughn's knee surgery may foreshadow a physical decline, aided and abetted by late nights, drinking and a weight problem.

Duquette declined to be interviewed, citing the delicacy of negotiations. But at a January media event he said: "All players who reach 30 have to make an adjustment. Those players have to watch their diet and put more emphasis on conditioning."

The remark, after Valentin's \$26 million signing to a four-year deal with an option for a fifth, should have caught Vaughn's atten-



ROCK BOTTOM: Local TV captured Vaughn on January 9 at his arraignment on drunken driving charges.

WCVB-TV/7AP

tion. Valentin is 10 months older than Vaughn.

Trainer Mackie Shilstone works with players of Vaughn's body type. Although Shilstone does not train Vaughn, among his clients is former NL MVP Kevin Mitchell, who, at 5-11, 240 pounds, is built similarly and whose career has been dogged by weight problems.

"In baseball, we find that the bigger guys with big guts tend to have more deviation in spinal curvature," says Shilstone, clinical director of the LSU Center for Sports Performance Fitness and Wellness. "It causes tightening of the hamstrings and (a wearing and tearing under) the kneecap." The antidote, Shilstone says, is weight reduction, strengthening of abdominal muscles and hamstring stretches.

In 1996, Duquette signed Mitchell, then 34, but he spent most of a half-season on the disabled list before being traded. In Vaughn, Duquette may see the lame ghost of Mitchell.

Leroy Vaughn acknowledges baseball executives are branding Mo with a scarlet "F" for fat. The label annoys him. He likens his son to Kirby Puckett, whose stocky build never was an issue.

After the accident, Vaughn passed a physical and retreated to his gated estate in Easton, Mass. He brooded for a few days, dismayed by a public reaction characterized as "disappointment without anger" by a local talk radio host. Then, Vaughn took an unusual step of placing an ad in Boston's two largest newspapers. In the ad, he cited the "serious nature" of the crash, acknowledged his regret and vowed to continue his community work.

One sentence stood out as an extraordinary window to his psyche: "I realize that I am considered a role model and not a saint."

Revealed is another "weight" problem, less visible but perhaps more telling. If Vaughn believes fans are expecting a "saint" for a cleanup hitter, then it may explain why the Foxy Lady is his entertainment of choice. If he felt sainted, then it was not entirely his fault. For years, the club and fans leaned on him to ease their racial anxiety.

His parents, retired career educators with exacting religious and community-service ideals, hold him to a high standard. The ad's sub-text is: "Ease off. I'm just a man." Even that is a stretch.

"He's a 30-year-old kid, not a hard 30-year-old man," Leroy Vaughn says. "When he's challenged, he's still got to go out and do it. After he homered off Randy Johnson, he was excited. He said to me, 'Daddy, only a few lefthanded hitters play against him. Only a few have hit home runs.'"

Vaughn left for Florida on February 1, in Ruthian fashion, to get an early start. Before leaving, he gave his first interview since the accident, acknowledged concerns about his weight, and vowed, "I'll be ready opening day."

Vaughn's enthusiasm for the game is youthful and contagious. Try to remember that come March 2, when he goes to trial for drunken driving. It promises to be an unpleasant moment for New England. If Vaughn is convicted, then there will be guilt enough to go around. But only one person will lose his driver's license and go on probation. And only one person will be challenged to prove himself, on opening day, and night. **TSN**

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Heavy lumber

The cumulative three-season totals (1995 through '97) of home runs, RBIs and slugging percentage for some of the game's top power-hitting first basemen:

	HR	RBI	Slug. pct.
Andres Galarraga	119	396	.567
Tino Martinez	100	369	.530
Mark McGwire	149	326	.684
Frank Thomas	115	370	.615
Mo Vaughn	118	365	.573

Source: STATS, Inc.

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