

### **Satchel Paige and the Shadows of the Negro Leagues**

Romanticized explanations often arise during the sports and race discussion. No longer is a story a way of telling historical fact, it seems, but is a way of entertaining and telling the feel-good epic tale. Before the integration of baseball in 1947 when the Brooklyn Dodgers and Branch Rickey negotiated and signed the second baseball known as Jackie Robinson, the game was segregated. The Negro Leagues, as historians have suggested, were a bonding experience for the great black players of our national pastime to work towards a common goal—the pursuit of a professional baseball career. But wait, says Mark Ribowsky, author of *Don't Look Back: Satchel Paige in the Shadows of Baseball*. Paige is considered by many to be the best pitcher who has ever lived, but Ribowsky explores the real Paige. He was not popular among his teammates nor opponents. He insisted on the honor of being a star. He always looked for top dollar, even if it meant switching from team to team. The hard-throwing righty often did not show up on time. Most significantly, when Paige got his shot at the big leagues, it wasn't a culmination of a lifelong dream, as we are trained to believe. Paige's concern was that he'd have to take a pay cut to do it. Ribowsky's book is about a man that regarded baseball as a business even in a heavily-racist society, an unusual claim given our theories about what the Negro Leagues were and what they represented. The book displays the realities of the Negro League clubhouse and explicitly contradicts the historians that have romanticized baseball in its, surprisingly, not-so-innocent form.

Ribowsky, time and time again, suggests that we don't really know the man that supposedly proved himself by not throwing blazing strikes over home plate, but over a cigarette placed on the ground. It is fact that Leroy Satchel Paige was born in the slums of Mobile, Alabama. But beyond that, we know very little about him. Historians aren't even exactly sure when Paige was born (many sources suggest July 7, 1905). This lone fact brings to light "one of the greatest sports enigmas of all time" (21), playing a huge part in bringing a sense of myth and mystery to Paige's life. While part of this mystery was a reflection of Paige's desire to keep his age a secret to seem more appealing to major league scouts, the mystery remains a mystery because of a lack of record keeping. In the South, some births were reported and some weren't, suggesting that it simply wasn't a governmental priority to keep accurate, up-to-date records of African American births and deaths. This may have been a result of Paige's birth occurring in the slums. When Bill Veeck, the Cleveland Indians general manager that signed Paige to a big-league contract in 1948, called the pitcher, some historians have suggested that Paige kept his age a secret in order to seem more appealing. Veeck investigated Paige's age, and even hired a private investigator, but in the end, Veeck was known to have attempted to hide Paige's age just as Paige himself had in an effort to gain public support for his signing of a black man. Paige's major league signing brings up an interesting theme: Those general managers that were brave enough to sign a talented black player had to put together their own public relations campaign to justify their signings.

Ribowsky's work provides a nice overview and timeline of how blacks were able to participate in baseball in a racist society. Following the Civil War, black ballplayers began to make strides into the American sporting culture. The Emancipation

Proclamation was geared towards bona fide rights, and the notion existed that games were simply for the well-bred leisure classes. The National Association of Base Ball Players was formed in 1867 and fearing that blacks would apply, the NABBP explicitly stated that “the admission of any club which may be composed of one or more colored persons” (59) would be prohibited. As a result of this exclusion, blacks formed their own teams. In 1920, the Negro Leagues were formed when Andrew “Rube” Foster, renowned pitcher and owner of the Chicago American Giants, called Midwestern team owners to Kansas City to discuss the possibilities of “blackball” (63). The game thrived until the onset of the Great Depression. Foster dreamed of a “racially pure blackball” (63). This was threatened when the American Giants were sold to Robert Cole, a white businessman. Whites saw black athletics as a novelty rather than a pastime. Furthermore, the contrast between black and white was increased as blacks were seen as “funny and outrageous people, bestial but benign” (63). They were simply entertainers, a minstrel show. Blacks were stripped of their credibility as hard-working athletes.

The black game began to drift northward. The Negro Southern League was formed in 1932 and had five teams, while the Negro National League was formed the following year and had seven organizations. In 1937, the American Negro League was formed, which brought together the best western and southern teams. Every club wanted Satchel Paige.

Satch pitched for the Baltimore Black Sox of the ANL, and although historical sources indicate such, Paige denies it, perhaps due to his experience in Baltimore as an outsider. “Satch” didn’t like to be known. Instead, he thrived on mysteriousness and preferred to be a victim of a guessing game of his past. Furthermore, Paige was known all

around baseball as a liar. Dick Powell, who owned a Negro league team in Baltimore, spoke of Paige's shadow: "He'd have his Cadillac with a canoe on top of it, 'cause he liked to go hunt and fish. He'd stand in front of the hotel and he'd keep you laughin' for hours. Satch was likeable fella, a damn good what people like to call a raconteur—what we called a damn good liar" (65). Paige himself said he enjoyed lying: "Mother always told me (that) if you tell a lie, always rehearse it. If it don't sound good to you, it won't sound good to nobody else" (22). First his age, now his playing history, Satch simply didn't tell the truth. This may be because he simply preferred to forget about his days in the Negro League because the majority of his playing career he was an outsider. Satch could throw the ball harder than anyone, and yet, couldn't fit into the blackball culture due to his competitive nature. Satch wasn't satisfied to simply be very good at what he did. He always wanted more, whether it be more money at various stages of his career or an opportunity to play at the big-league level. Romanticized historical accounts rarely display this competitive edge and desire. Instead, the black athlete's struggle is addressed far more frequently than the competition and conflict on the Negro diamond. What the black player couldn't do (play in the big leagues) is discussed more often than what the black player did accomplish on the field. Often times, this competition translated into an overwhelming desire to be the star of the show.

Satch was said to be "happy there but miserable at the ballpark" (66) during his days as a member of the Black Sox. What bothered him most was that he was the club's number two pitcher. "The star of the team was [pitcher] Lamon Yokeley," said Dick Powell, who was in attendance at many Black Sox games. "And Satch didn't do as well as perhaps he could have, because at that time they played two games when they played;

it was customary to play a doubleheader. And he would go second. Yokeley went first” (66). Paige had an ego, and the lone fact that Yokeley overshadowed him prompted him to leave Baltimore, and to ultimately “forget” about his encounters there. This made for cold-shouldered relations between Negro league counterparts and very little camaraderie.

Satch was cocky. Baseball enthusiasts rarely see the personalities that were displayed during baseball’s segregated era, nor do we see the economic influences of the black game on not only black culture but American culture in general. Paige, however, understood that economics were the driving force behind the game that he loved. He also knew that his own presence on the pitching rubber brought fans to the ballpark night after night, and he let people know this. “The only owners disgusted with me were the ones who couldn’t make that big money because I wasn’t pitching for them,” he said. “Before, there was no big money in the Negro leagues. Guys were making only about a hundred twenty-five a month. Then they started getting nice, fat checks—and those checks were paid by the fans. I got the fans out and I opened up the parks to hold them. That’s why they paid me more. Some guys didn’t like it. With me someplace else, the fans would be someplace else” (89).

Paige also thought he was too good for blackball, a startling contradiction to traditional Negro league historical accounts. In 1935, Satch turned his back on the Philadelphia Giants in search of more money. When offers came in of \$300 or \$400 a month, Paige was still discontented even though those offers were the best of the time. Satch even got a chance to be the leader of his own team, the “Satchel Paige All-Stars,” and faced big-league players out of the Bay Area. The pitcher struck out 12 and only allowed three hits in nine innings of work. Satch faced a man by the name of Joe

Dimaggio, who went 1-for-4. “The greatest baseball pitching attraction in the world is being passed up by scouts, club owners and managers only because the doors of organized ball are closed to him,” *Oakland Journal* sportswriter Eddie Murphy wrote in his game story. “[but] there’s a movement to have [Paige] appear here next Sunday as pitcher for the Minor League All-Stars, and oppose the Major Stars again” (138). While it indeed look like Satch would get a chance to showcase his talents at the (white) professional level, he was still concerned with his paycheck. “I’m probably drawin’ more money right now than any other pitcher in baseball. What owner is goin’ to pay that kind of money right now at my age? (138)” The answer came on July 7, 1948.

Veeck came calling on July 9, 1948. The Indians were in a pennant race and in desperate need of pitching. “For Veeck, watching the scene was more than strange; it was damn near *unthinkable* that Satch, one day after his forty-second birthday—and Veeck thought that he was at least six years older—had to audition, and almost demeaning that he had to do so for a white man so much younger” (248). On the same day in which Paige tried out, he signed his first major league contract in the amount of \$40,000 for the three months remaining in the season. Satch became the first Negro pitcher in the American League and the seventh Negro big leaguer overall.

According to Tom Meany, sportswriter for the *New York Star*, “the signing of Satchel Paige to a Cleveland contract is far more interesting than was the news when Branch Rickey broke baseball’s color line by signing Jackie Robinson to a Montreal contract ... The Satchmo has been a baseball legend for a long time, a Paul Bunyan in Technicolor. More fabulous tales have been told of Satchel’s pitching ability than of any pitcher in Organized Ball.” Baseball enthusiast or not, the Jackie Robinson story is

known as *the* story that changed baseball forever. Ribowsky, however, expresses an alternative view, one that is intriguing in light of how we have come to understand the game of baseball and its development. Blackball was a separate game and institution. Negro players were content to participate in baseball as they knew it—blackball—and when Ricky signed Robinson (in addition to Baltimore’s Roy Campanella, Homestead’s Roy Partlow and Newark pitcher Don Newcombe, names in which we often don’t hear mentioned in the same breath as Robinson), the blackball culture became vulnerable. In opting for integration, the Negro league owners were not compensated for what they lost. Those players that didn’t receive the attention of owners such as Ricky were stuck in a culture that was diminishing (229). Satch was an “agent” (235) in the ascent of Jackie Robinson. As Jackie opened the door, Paige not only craved fan attention but also initiated it. His attitude, blazing fastball and popularity sent Satch into baseball immortality.

Satchel Paige traveled to Cooperstown to be inducted into the Hall of Fame on August 9, 1971, a date significant because it was the first time that there would be no separate Negro wing in the baseball shrine. The plaques of Negro league heroes would be hung directly next to their Caucasian counterparts. Those who had previously been denied citizenship in the baseball world would be recognized as part of the game’s nobility (328). “I am the proudest man on the earth today,” Satch said. “It’s a wonderful day and one who appreciates it is Leroy Paige (328).” Paige was proud not only because he was the newest Hall inductee, but also because of the intense pride that he carried on his shoulders – pride not only for the graduates of blackball, but for the game of baseball that now was black and white.

Ribowsky's work is well thought-out because it challenges traditional historical notions of how the game of baseball became what it is – our National Pastime. The title *Don't Look Back* is interesting because it poses a provocative question: Why is it that we allow romanticized explanations about how our game became integrated, and how is it that one figure, Jackie Robinson, is the lone explanation to a very complicated and diverse dilemma? We don't probe deeper into the game's racially-constructed history. We like to think that one man came along and integrated the game of baseball, in turn making the life of any Negro player better because of the newfound opportunity. But we forget that the black game was a cultural icon in the African American community. And rarely, if ever, do we imagine the Black player on such a motivated tear that he is worried that integration will force a pay cut. We know very little about the Negro leagues and the history of blackball, although we like to claim that the process was a simple one. Today, black players can be as wealthy as white players, or even more so. Some of them forget there can be black-white problems in sport. And many of them, black or white, don't know the man that initiated that somewhat invisible line.

“If only they coulda seen Satchel,” Buck O’Neil said at Satch’s funeral. “If only they’d’a seen (338).” O’Neil lays out the problem and somewhat of a solution. Baseball is about history, passion, the intricacies of black and white culture and how the game became our national game. The current landscape of our Pastime fails to appreciate this and fails to address it. The racial tensions of baseball, in the past and present, are much more complex than one man breaking the color barrier.