

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN SPORTS

Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow

by Larry Tye

Satchel Paige was pitching in the Negro Leagues in California when he got the news he had been anticipating for two decades. Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey had just signed a Negro to a big-league contract—the first Negro in modern times. Word tore through America’s clubhouses and grandstands that October afternoon in 1945: a black man was going to be in the minors, then the Major Leagues. Jackie Robinson would topple baseball’s color bar. And Leroy “Satchel” Paige would not.



St. Louis Browns pitcher Satchel Paige, 1952
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Earthshaking—almost like the emancipation of the slaves, integration supporters proclaimed. It was fitting “that the end of baseball’s Jim Crow law should follow the conclusion of a great war to preserve liberty, equality and decency,” wrote Lee Dunbar of the *Oakland Tribune*. A desecration of the natural order, segregationists shot back. “We live happier with segregation in athletics as well as all other activities,” argued Bud Seifert of South Carolina’s *Spartanburg Journal*. Bob Feller, the Cleveland Indians flamethrower with a golden arm and a tin ear, told reporters that if Jackie “were a white man, I doubt if they would consider him as big league material.”

The public listened to the cacophony of voices, but the one it wanted to hear most of all was Satchel’s. What did America’s best-loved black ballplayer—the man everyone had assumed would be first—make of the Dodgers’ historic move? “They didn’t make a mistake by signing Robinson,” Satchel said. “They couldn’t have picked a better man.” The words ate at him even as he uttered them. Not only was he being bumped, he was being bumped by his Negro Leagues teammate, an untested rookie who could not hit a curve, gun a throw to first, or land the job as the Kansas City Monarchs’ second baseman until an injury forced out the incumbent.

Other seasoned Negro Leaguers were resentful that the young slugger had never served his time in the sandlots and barnyards, eating dust and fending off slurs. Robinson had not proven himself against the best white ballplayers the way Satchel would do again that next night in San Diego against Feller’s All-Stars from the all-white majors. Rather than show deference to the old hands who had proven

themselves, Jackie showed disdain. He complained about the seedy hotels. He objected to puny paychecks and uneven umpiring.

Satchel tried to be philosophical. He understood that he was aging and old-school, while the twenty-six-year-old Robinson was a college boy and Army veteran who Rickey felt could bear the ruthless scrutiny of being first. Jackie did not balk at Rickey's plan to start him in the minors, in faraway Montreal. Satchel never could have abided the affront. Jackie had the table manners whites liked; Satchel was rough-hewn and ungovernable. Satchel realized he was a specter from the past rather than the harbinger of the more racially tolerant future the Dodgers wanted.

Still, it hurt. It was Paige who had proved during two decades of barnstorming across America and pitching in the shadow world of the Negro Leagues that white fans along with black would come to see great black ballplayers, and that proof was what pushed Rickey to rip down baseball's racial barricades. Satchel threw so hard that his catchers tried to soften the sting by cushioning their gloves with beefsteaks, and had control so precise that he used a hardball to knock lit cigarettes out of the mouths of obliging teammates. Satchel was so dominating—especially when his teams were beating the best of the white big leaguers—that even good ol' boys like Dizzy Dean could not help but be impressed. Major League owners noticed, too. One of them—flamboyant Bill Veeck of the Cleveland Indians—said he tried to sign Paige and other blacks in 1944, a year before Rickey's deal with Robinson, but was blocked by the baseball commissioner. It was Satchel who brought this spotlight to the Negro Leagues, the amazing Kansas City Monarchs, and their first-year second-baseman Jackie Robinson.

Paige was savvy enough to know that Americans have room for just one hero at a time. If Jackie became the knight who slew Jim Crow, the roles of the real pioneers would be lost. Satchel felt sorry for all the great black ballplayers of the segregated era—from Fleetwood Walker and Rube Foster to Josh Gibson, the black Babe Ruth—and sorrier still for himself. He worried that he would be remembered as a Stepin Fetchit or worse, an Uncle Tom. Satchel never saw himself going to war over every racial slight, but he had stood up. He refused to play in a town unless it supplied lodging and food to him and his teammates, a defiance for which young civil rights workers would get arrested and lionized a generation later. Only a player of his stature and grace could manage that without getting his skull cracked open. It was painful, after all those years of hearing “if only you were white,” to be told now “if only you were younger.”

“I'd been the guy who'd started all that big talk about letting us in the big time,” Satchel wrote in his memoir. “I'd been the one who everybody'd said should be in the majors.” To be denied that chance hurt as badly as “when somebody you love dies or something dies inside you.”

When the pain ran that deep only one person could ease it: his girlfriend and confidante, Lahoma Brown. So cherished was her advice that Satchel recalled it word-for-word seventeen years afterward, when she'd become his wife and mother to his seven children. “They took that kid off our team and didn't even look at me,” Satchel told her. “He's young, Satchel,” Lahoma answered. “Maybe that's why.”

“He’s no Satchel Paige.” “Everybody knows that, Satchel . . . If they let one colored player into their leagues, they’ll be letting others. Maybe the major leaguers’ll come to you.” “They’ll have to come real pretty-like. They’ve been puttin’ me off too long to just wiggle their fingers at me now.” “Don’t you go sounding like you’re sour. When they come for you, you know you’ll go. You’ve been wanting it real bad for too long not to.” “Well, it still was me that ought to have been first.”

The sense of having been wronged never left him. Satchel Paige had etched his legend as a ballplayer and performer, but he was right about the public’s memory: when it comes to integrating baseball there is only one name that today’s children or even their grandparents know—Jackie Robinson. Satchel Paige had been hacking away at Jim Crow decades before the world got to know Jackie Robinson, laying the groundwork for him the way A. Philip Randolph, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other early civil rights leaders did for Martin Luther King Jr. Paige was as much a poster boy for black baseball as Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong was for black music and Paul Robeson was for the black stage—and much as those two became symbols of their art in addition to their race, so Satchel was known not as a great black pitcher but a great pitcher. Satchel Paige led blackball to the promised land of big-time baseball. He opened the national pastime to blacks and forever changed his sport and this nation.

Larry Tye, a former reporter at the Boston Globe, is author of five books, including *Satchel: The Life and Times of an American Legend* (www.larrytye.com)

SUGGESTED SOURCES

BOOKS AND PRINTED MATERIALS

A biography of Satchel Paige by the author of this essay:

Tye, Larry. *Satchel: The Life and Times of an American Legend*. New York: Random House, 2009.

There are two versions of Paige’s memoirs, one published in 1948 and another, fuller version published fourteen years later; both have been reprinted:

Paige, Satchel. *Pitchin’ Man: Satchel Paige’s Own Story*. Westport, CT: Meckler, 1992 (reprint of the 1948 memoir).

Paige, Satchel. *Maybe I’ll Pitch Forever: A Great Baseball Player Tells the Hilarious Story behind the Legend*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993 (reprint of the 1962 edition).

Another useful book is:

Ribowsky, Mark. *Don’t Look Back: Satchel Paige in the Shadows of Baseball*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

On Jackie Robinson:

Eig, Jonathan. *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson’s First Season*. New York: Simon &

Schuster, 2007.

Frommer, Harvey. *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Barrier*. New York: MacMillan, 1982. [Reprinted in 2003 with a foreword by Robinson's teammate Monte Irvin; draws heavily on interviews with Robinson's family and teammates.]

Rampersad, Arnold. *Jackie Robinson: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1997.

Tygiel, Jules. *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*. New York: Oxford, 2008.

On Branch Rickey:

Lowenfish, Lee. *Branch Rickey: Baseball's Ferocious Gentleman*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

Polner, Murray. *Branch Rickey: A Biography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007.

On the Kansas City Monarchs, Paige's last team in the Negro Leagues, and one of the most famous:

Bruce, Janet. *The Kansas City Monarchs: Champions of Black Baseball*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985.

Chadwick, Bruce. *When the Game Was Black and White: The Illustrated History of the Negro Leagues*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1992.

Gardner, Robert, and Dennis Shortelle. *The Forgotten Players: The Story of Black Baseball in America*. New York: Walker and Co., 1993. ["Young adult" level book.]

Heaphy, Leslie A. *The Negro Leagues, 1869–1960*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2002.

Heaphy, Leslie A. ed. *Satchel Paige and Company: Essays on the Kansas City Monarchs, Their Greatest Star and the Negro Leagues*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007. [Collection of papers presented at a scholarly conference.]

Hogan, Lawrence B. *Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African-American Baseball*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2006.

Holway, John. *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues*. New York: Dover, 2010. [Revised edition of a volume of oral history memoirs of famous players in the leagues first published in 1989.]

Brent P. Kelley has compiled three different volumes of oral history memoirs with players for the Negro Leagues, all published by McFarland, Jefferson, NC: *"I Will Never Forget": Interviews with 39 Former Negro League Players* (2003), *The Negro Leagues Revisited: Conversations with 66 More Baseball Heroes* (2000), and *Voices from the Negro Leagues: 27 Selected Interviews with Baseball Standouts of*

the Period 1924–1960 (2009).

Kirwin, Bill, ed. *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. [Interesting collection of articles from past issues of *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture*.]

Lanctot, Neil. *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. [Focuses on the League teams from 1933 to the 1950s.]

Peterson, Robert. *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.

Rogosin, Donn. *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

White, Sol, and Jerry Malloy. *Sol White's History of Colored Base Ball, with Other Documents on the Early Black Game, 1886–1936*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. [Sol White, a leading player and manager in the Negro Leagues, published his brief "History" in 1907. Baseball historian Jerry Malloy supplements the facsimile reprint with later writings by White.]

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is an official Satchel Paige website with a biography, photos, quotes, and stats:

<http://www.satchelpaige.com/index.php>

The Negro Leagues' Baseball Museum website in collaboration with the College of Education at Kansas State University includes a teachers' resources section, essential for individual players like Paige and broader topics:

<http://www.coe.ksu.edu/nlbemuseum/resource/guide.html>

The Negro Leagues' Baseball Player's Association site is also full of resources:

<http://www.nlbpa.com/index.html>

For Jackie Robinson, you can start with the biographical information at the Jackie Robinson Foundation site:

<http://www.jackierobinson.org/about/jackie.php>

Life magazine has a photo gallery of images of Robinson from the magazine's files:

<http://www.life.com/image/3234210/in-gallery/23148/jackie-robinson-american-pioneer>

AUDIOVISUAL RESOURCES

Supplement Ken Burns's documentary *Baseball* with this more difficult-to-find public television documentary featuring experts like Janet Bruce, Chuck Haddix, Claude Page, Larry Lester,

Teddy Dibble, Scott O’Kelly, and Carla Seary:

The Kansas City Monarchs: Ain’t Seen Nothing Like It Since. Kansas City [Mo.]: KCPT Public Television, 1994. Documentary

Citation Guidelines for Online Resources

RELATED SITE CONTENT

Essay: A Local and National Story: The Civil Rights Movement in Postwar Washington, DC

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