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A rare 'Paige' out of baseball's history

It was too little, too late for Negro League's greatest pitcher

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By Glenn C. Altschuler



AP

Satchel Paige winds up for the pitch against the Montreal Royals in the second game of the doubleheader April 29, 1956 in Miami.

In 1926, Sammy Nicklin, owner of the minor league team, the Chattanooga Lookouts, approached Satchel Paige, the pitching phenom for a black team in that Tennessee town, with a novel proposition.

Nicklin offered Paige \$500 to pitch against the Atlanta Crackers, Satchel recalled. "I just had to let him paint me white."

The deal fell through, Larry Tye tells us in his splendid biography of one of the greatest hurlers in the history of baseball, when a coach insisted that the paint might well wear off during a game.

But Satchel's dream of striking out the best hitters in America, white and black, did not die.

Drawing on hundreds of interviews with family, friends, Negro Leaguers and Major Leaguers, Tye traces Paige's odyssey across the Western Hemisphere, as a superstar and super showman, documenting and de-bunking tales about him, tall, short, and surreal.

Some of Paige's best years were with the Pittsburgh Crawfords in the 1930s, but life on the road for Negro League players was hard, Tye reminds us.

**"SACHEL: THE LIFE AND
TIMES OF AN AMERICAN
LEGEND"**

If they were lucky, the athletes found a hotel or rooming house proprietor willing to accommodate them.

By Larry Tye
Random House (\$26)

"Lights stayed on all night to keep the cockroaches and bedbugs in their crevices. Lying on newspapers also helped; the crinkling sent the vermin scampering."

No one, Tye suggests, not even Joe Louis or Duke Ellington, was "quite the hero for blacks that Satchel was." He also claims, somewhat less persuasively, that although Paige "did conjure up the sadly comic persona of the shiftless Step (Stepin Fetchit) as he shuffled to the mound," he was an "important race trailblazer."

Paige refused to play in cities that did not supply food and lodging to him and his teammates. He made "believers" out of segregationists. Tye writes by using a "brilliantly defiant parody" to disarm them, then dazzling them with his pitching prowess.

But he acknowledges, as well, that many whites "thought they were seeing a black man who was lazy as well as stupid."

Was Paige a "linchpin" in a "subversive bid" to bring down Jim Crow in baseball? Probably not. Seeking fortune and fame, he looked out first -- and almost always -- for No. 1. In 1942 he told a reporter for the Associated Press that, since no white team could match his \$37,000 salary, "and the financial angle is all I'd be interested in," he was not eager for a spot in the Major Leagues.

The best way to take on segregation, he opined, was for the American and National Leagues to add complete teams of Negro stars.

Signed by the Cleveland Indians in 1948, 42-year old Paige entered the promised land. He helped the team win the pennant, compiling a remarkable 6-1 record, with a 2.47 earned run average, and got a few votes for Rookie of the Year.

Released during the next season, he hung on, hungry for a paycheck. "Expectations ran high for his sentimental appeal," Tye tells us, "and were low enough for his pitching performance that he generally exceeded them." In 1965, at 59, he became the oldest man ever to appear in the Major Leagues.

Paige was admitted to the Hall of Fame in 1971. But justice delayed was surely justice denied. Old age, Tye writes, robbed Satchel "first of his health, then his optimism."

Lonely, sad, bitter, and poor, he was willing to do just about anything to cash in on his celebrity. And finding fewer and fewer opportunities to do so.

Fortunately, that's not the way we'll remember him. With his seventh rule for living, Larry Tye concludes, Satchel showed us the way:

"Do things so big they invite exaggeration, ballyhoo what you have done, then let the press and the public weave it into lore."

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