

# **Satchel**

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**What do you get when you mix a poor skinny kid from Mobile, Alabama, 6 years in reform school, and infectious disarming smile, cocky confidence, irresistible personality, the gift of a poet, the restlessness of a drifter, the charisma of a politician, colorful tall tales, the longevity of the ages, the perfection of an artist and oh by the way.... Did I mention an insatiable Love for the Sport of Baseball ...Leroy Robert “Satchel” Paige.**

**Leroy Robert “Satchel” Paige for many was bigger than life. A man among boys in his chosen profession of Baseball. Loved and admired by scores of fans, not only for his immeasurable skills displayed on the ball field but even more so for his most enduring characteristic.....His natural ability to entertain.**

**Leroy Robert Paige was delivered at home into the hands of a midwife, which was more help than most poor families could afford in 1906 in Mobile, Alabama. His mother, Lula, was a washerwoman who already spent her nights worrying how to feed and sustain the four daughters and two sons who had come before. Five more would follow. Leroy’s father, John, alternated between the luxuriant lilies in the gardens he tended uptown and the corner stoops on which he liked to loiter, rarely making time to care for his expanding brood. With skin the shade of chestnut and a birthplace in the heartland of the former confederacy, the newborn’s prospects looked woeful. Between 1910 and 1920, blacks’ share of Mobile’s population fell from 44 to 39 percent. The KKK operated freely. Blacks disappeared from public offices and from voting rolls. Leroy Paige was too young to understand those developments but they were reinforced every day he spent in his native city.**

**At school he was absent so often that the Paige home became a regular stop on the truant officer’s rounds. One night in 1918, walking home after dark, he passed a five and dime store with an alluring display of gold-colored bands and red and green stones. In he went and , when he thought no one was looking, he stuffed a fistful of the trinkets into his pocket. Unluckily for Satchel, a burly security guard saw him pocket the loot, nabbed him, and dragged him to police headquarters. That night the authorities released him to his mother Lula. It would be his last night home for more than five years and would mark the end of his boyhood.**

**The sign out front said Alabama Reform School for Juvenile Negro Law-Breakers. Known as “Mount Meigs” in reality the institution was not the brain child of white penal officials but instead was the invention of the Alabama Federation of Colored Women’s clubs, which opened the school in 1907 to reform wayward Negro Boys.”**

**The reformatory gave him more food than he was used to, with more clothes, warmth, and space. Stachel excels in choir and made the drum and bugle corps. But then there was.....Baseball. There was a coach too, Edward Byrd, who for the first time taught**

**Satchel the games' fundamentals. Young Satchel's anatomy was all up and down, rising to more than six foot tall and weighing barely 140 pounds. Tutelage like Satchel was getting on the ball field was just one aspect of a fantastic social experiment under way at Mount Meigs, even if he never knew it. When he left in 1923 he was secure in his reading, writing, math and know how on throwing a baseball.**

**That summer after a brief try out Satchel was signed on the spot and joined the semi-pro, all black Mobile Tigers.**

**By the time his father John, died Satchel was on the way to realizing that ball-playing dream, building a success story that kept outstripping itself. In 1924, just a year out of Mount Meigs, he won 30 games and lost just once. The next year every team around wanted him. By midseason the following year, 1926, he strung together 25 wins in a row. Going for win number twenty six, something snagged: with a 1-0 lead in the ninth, and two outs, his infield made three straight errors. The bases were loaded and Satchel was fuming. The crowd began to hiss, which made him even madder. He waved in his outfielders. When they gathered around him, he told them to sit down on the grass behind him, I'm pitching this last guy without an outfield. He milked the situation the way he did cows back at Mount Meigs, taking his time pumping back and forth. Three pitches, three strikes and a number 26 in a row in the bag. The kid was only twenty years old.**

**In 1931 at the still-evolving age of twenty-five, the Negro Leagues were crumbling around him. He knew what he needed: a team with enough talent, money and patience to lift him out of the shadows and onto the Glory Trail..... Enter William Augustus "Gasoline Gus" Greenlee and the Pittsburgh Crawfords.**

**Everyone in black Pittsburgh knew "Gasoline Gus," but as a bootlegger and numbers runner, not a sportsman. Few noticed in 1930 when he purchased the Crawfords, a scrappy sandlot club in the mainly black Hill District. No one imagined the Negro racketeer remaking the team into Negro baseball's version of the Mighty Saint Louis Cardinals.**

**After prohibition ended the locals managed to fend off the Mob and Greenlee established himself as a kingpin in the numbers game, where his take could top \$25,000 a day. He also launched legitimate businesses, including the Workingmen's Pool Hall, The Sunset Café, and the Crawford Grill, Pittsburgh's version of New York's Cotton Club. By the early 1930's Pittsburgh was to America's black sports scene what Harlem was to its literary and arts life.**

**It helps in sports to have a natural rival. Long before Gasoline Gus arrived, the Crawfords and their fans had loved to hate the Grays, a team just across the river in Homestead, Pennsylvania, a company town dominated by Andrew Carnegie's steelworks, and the Grays were Carnegie's Black steelworkers. During one stretch in the recent past the Gray's had beat the Crawford's and other area teams forty two games in a row.**

**Gasoline Gus Greenlee started courting Satchel Paige almost as soon as he took control of the Crawford's in 1930. Gus sent a note to Satch saying, there was a chance he would acquire the pitcher the next season. Satchel responded that there was a chance he would come. For a mere \$250 a month the owner landed the player who, more than any, would lift the Crawfords to ascendancy over the Grays.**

With his wealth, Gus Greenlee, used the 1931 offseason to surround Satchel with the most awesome and feared lineup in the Negro league history. The speedy double-play specialist John Henry "pistol" Russell was acquired from the Detroit Wolves, followed by the world's fastest and most composed base runner, Cool Papa Bell, also Judy Johnson from the Hilldales of Philadelphia and then Gus went beneath the muscle to the heart of the Crosstown Grays, raiding them of Double Duty Radcliffe, Oscar Charleston and the immortal slugger Josh Gibson, the pride of the lineup. Years later a noted sportswriter would write, that as good as the 1931 Grays were, the 1932 Crawfords.....with five players destined for the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.....made an even more compelling case as Blackball's Best Ever.

Gus had decided from the first that his new team deserved a high-class stadium, so at a whopping cost of \$75,000 he constructed and opened a brand new baseball park "Greenlee Field" to a capacity crowd on opening day of the 1932 season. No more indignities of renting a stadium where bias banned the players from using the locker rooms.

The game was a pitcher's duel from the start, with Satchel facing off against the New York Black Yankees' Jesse "Mountain" Hubbard, whose career had begun shortly before Satchel took up residence at Mount Meigs. Both pitchers were known for big-game performances. For the first eight innings, Satchel let just two Black Yankees as far as second while Hubbard held the Crawford's to three hits. Then the New Yorkers opened with a single in the top of the ninth, ushered the runner to third on a throwing error during an attempted steal, and scored on a blooper to right field. Later, with two outs in the bottom of the ninth, the Crawfords had one last chance to pull even with monster home run hitter Josh Gibson at bat. On the way to the plate Josh stopped off to greet his mother in one of the field boxes, collecting a kiss along with advice on how to win the game for Satchel. It seemed to work.....Josh smashed the ball to deep center field for what looked to be an extra-base hit....but it was not to be. The Yankees' center fielder caught up with the ball near the fence and Satchel took his first loss of the young season.

In 1932 the Crawford's won 99 games, losing just thirty six. Satchel was the team's biggest drawing card and most feared pitcher, finishing with a record of 23-7 and a respectable batting average of .288 with two home runs.

In spite of his stellar statistics many of Satchel's Pittsburgh teammates resented him because of his frequent absences and his antics. His shuffle to the mound was described as a slow motion spectacle. His windmill windup made him look like a tin lizzie. He talked trash to batters and pantomimed with fans in addition to bragging about his pitching. And to add insult to injury Gus Greenlee freely capitalized upon a practice common among negro league owners of renting out their star players during the season to small town teams around the country. Satchel would pitch two to three endings by agreement and would be paid as much as five hundred dollars while the owners would receive many times that amount. This practice did not set well with other teammates.

Satchel's 1934 season with the Pittsburgh Crawford's was dubbed one of the best seasons of his life. He achieved a record of 18 wins and 2 losses while mowing down 144 batters and issuing only 26 bases on balls. His ERA was 2.16, .59 lower than Lefty Gomez. Add his nonleague games in California, Denver, and other spots across the nation and 1934 record soars to 35-2 while his total run average drops to 1.38.

**On July 4<sup>th</sup> Satchel pitched a classic No Hitter against the Gray's. Buck Leonard was the best Gray's Batsman that year. After Satchel blew the first pitch by him in the first inning, Buck asked that the ball be inspected. The umpire took a look, threw the ball out and gave Satch a new ball. Again it came in like a Bolt....disintegrated again Buck's face, for and eight straight strike! Again Buck asked the ump to have a look, and, as before Umpire Young tossed the ball out of the game. "You're gonna have to toss all of em' warned Satch, cause they all gonna jump! One fan later commented, it sounded like shooting Firecrackers every time the ball hit the catchers mit.**

**That year Satchel received the highest number of fan votes by far, for the annual negro league East-West All-Star Classic.**

**An interesting footnote was pinned to the end of the 1934 season when twelve thousand cheering fans witnessed a show down between Satchel and the Dean Brothers. Most had come to watch Dizzy and his hard-throwing brother, Paul Daffy Dean, who also had won two World Series games that fall for the champion St. Louis Cardinals. On this Sunday the Deans had rented themselves out to the Rosenblums, Cleveland's top minor league team, for an exhibition game against Satchel and his Pittsburgh Crawford's. Dizzy was sharp for the three innings he tossed, allowing a single run on four hits before joining Daffy in the outfield. Satchel was described as transcendent. For six innings Satchel had his way with the Rosenblum sluggers. Eighteen times they came to the plate, and eighteen times they sat back down without a hit. Thirteen were strikeout victims. The Crawford's manager took Satchel out after six innings.**

**1935 marked Satchel's final season with the Pittsburgh Crawford's as disagreements over money resulted in a final split between Gus Greenlee and Satchel. Next stop.....of all places Bismarck, North Dakota.**

**Bismarck in the 1930 was an implausible place for a Black Man to be a VIP or to be at all. The entire population of North Dakota was .05 black. In the hinterlands of the Northern Plains it was okay not just to play on the same field as whites, which Satchel had done before, but to team up with them. That was a first for him. That was also why Club Manager and Automobile Mogul Neil Churchill enticed Satchel to join his team in Bismarck, North Dakota. Churchill wanted to beat his nemesis, Jamestown, a city a hundred miles down the road, who had signed black players earlier in the season. 1935 would prove to be another banner year for Satchel who completed the season with an impressive record of 29-2 with an ERA of 1.96. By the end of the season Satchel accounted for 321 strikeouts with a mere sixteen bases on balls. During one stretch in July, Bismarck played thirty games in twenty seven days with Satchel pitching at least an inning in each. Bismarck completed it's season 66-14-4.**

**The crowning baseball event of the 1935 season was a National playoff for semi-pro teams hosted in Wichita, Kansas. Thirty two teams from around the country competed for the coveted crown. The Bismarck Team swept the tournament in seven straight games, with Satchel winning four of the seven games with an ERA of 1.62 and sixty strikeouts against only six walks. Bismarck was the only integrated team.**

**In many ways his playing days in Bismarck would constitute not just a defining chapter in a storied baseball career, but a critical link on a chain stretching from Bud Fowler to Jackie Robinson. A half century after Fowler, Satchel and his Bismarck teammates reminded**



America that blacks and whites could play baseball side by side without the sky falling, fans rioting, or the standard of play being compromised. More than a decade before Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers. The club from North Dakota offered Major League executives proof that integrated baseball could put money in their pockets. That mattered more than all their good intentions. In Bismarck, Satchel summed it up simply, "I'd cracked another little chink in Jim Crow."

Satchel by his own admission was the most prolific Barnstormer that ever played the game of baseball. Barnstorming was the practice of freelancing from team to team and never really sticking with any team for very long. Although most players were under contract the negro leagues had little influence or incentive to come to the aide of embattled owners when key players barnstormed the circuit of teams throughout the country and abroad. Satchel estimated that he played for over 250 different teams during the course of his career. This practice was financially more lucrative to both star players and team owners as gate receipts would soar when Icons of the game were on the roster.

Paige was the biggest drawing card in Negro League baseball. His presence guaranteed large crowds. Paige was often tempted to jump from team to team or league to league, to get a bigger paycheck. In 1937, he led a large group of Negro Leaguers to the Dominican republic, to play for a team owned by Dominican President Rafael L. Trujillo. The move decimated the Crawfords, from which Paige and most of the players hailed. Later, Paige went to play in the Mexican League. It was in the Mexican League that Paige's fabled arm went dead. He could barely lift his arm much less pitch. Having burned a number of bridges behind him in the States, only one ballclub owner was willing to give Paige a chance to play ball again...J.L. Wilkinson of the Kansas City Monarchs. Satchel's return to baseball greatness took place without his blazing fastball; he now had to rely on control, guile and the occasional trick pitch.

Satchel's performance in exhibition games with major league teams led Dizzy Dean, Bob Feller, Joe Dimaggio, and Ted Williams to proclaim Paige the best pitcher in baseball.

After Jackie Robinson was signed to play major league baseball, many thought it was a shame that Satchel, now in his forties, never got the same chance. Bill Veeck, the Cleveland Indians owner, took a chance and signed Satchel in midseason 1948. Satchel won six games and lost one, and pitched in relief in others, down the stretch. The Indians won their first pennant in 28 years, putting to rest the talk that Veeck had merely signed Paige as a publicity stunt. Paige retired from professional baseball in 1953.

In 1965 at the age of 59 years, two months and eight days Leroy Robert Satchel Paige appeared in his final professional baseball game. Charlie Finley, owner of The Kansas City Athletics brought Satchel back for a final debut. He pitched three shut out endings, yielding only one hit to a young Carl Yaskrimski.

Paige is well known for his many common sense and life inspiring quotes.....

- Age is a case of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it don't matter
- Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you
- I ain't never had a job, I just always played baseball

- I never rush myself. See, they can't start the game without me
- I never threw an illegal pitch. The trouble is, once in a while I toss one that ain't never been seen by this generation
- If a man can beat you, walk him
- My pitching philosophy is simple – keep the ball way from the bat

**Leroy Robert Satchel Paige was formally inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York in 1971.**

**Satchel and his third wife Lahoma were married in 1945 and had two sons and five daughters. The youngest of which was born in 1965 when Satchel was 59 years old. His early children got a dad with more energy to do the lifting and running that fatherhood calls for. His later ones got more of a full-time Dad, since he was no longer out with his teams nine or more months a year. As a father Satchel emphasized education to his children as the primary key to survival, reflecting on the missed opportunity in his own life. If education was lesson number one, being humble and grounded was next. Satchel knew firsthand the pitfalls of arrogance. He knew also, that his fame would not help his children earn a living or make it through life.**

**Satchel Paige quietly departed this life on June 8, 1982 in Kansas City, Missouri.**

**In his last years the world may not have paid Satchel the attention he craved, but it did upon his death. The New York Times called him *“one of those wondrously endowed and worldly athletes who looms larger than any sports arena,”* adding that *“it does not diminish the achievements of Jackie Robinson and other young blacks who broke baseball’s color barrier to remember that Satchel Paige showed the way.”***

**Washington Post baseball bard Tom Boswell wrote that *“the Paige tragedy is that, by his excellence, he proved that 50 years worth of black-league players had been wronged more severely than white America ever suspected.”***

**The reigning mayor, Richard Berkley, asked Kansas Citians to lower their flags to half-mast as Satchel’s body was transported to Forest Hills Cemetery. In a style befitting a king, Satchel was laid to rest in an isolated burial plot dubbed PAIGE ISLAND.**

**Robert Leroy Satchel Paige – Don’t Look Back.**

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