

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

by Larry Tye

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*St. Louis Brown's pitcher Satchel Paige, 1952.  
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

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.

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.

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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](http://www.larrytye.com))

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Who was Satchel Paige?

- A the first black baseball player in the Major Leagues
- B a talented baseball pitcher in the Negro Leagues in California
- C a pitcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team
- D a major civil rights activist in the 1940s

2. What does the author describe throughout most of the text?

- A the reasons why Jackie Robinson was signed to the Major Leagues, rather than Satchel Paige
- B the personal relationship between Satchel Paige and Jackie Robinson
- C the significance of the integration of Major League baseball to the civil rights movement
- D the way Satchel Paige felt about not being the first black baseball player in the Major Leagues

3. Read this statement.

Major League team owners were worried about how white baseball fans would react to a black baseball player joining their league.

What evidence from the text supports this statement?

- A "Satchel realized he was a specter from the past rather than the harbinger of the more racially tolerant future the Dodgers wanted."
- B "Jackie did not balk at Rickey's plan to start him in the minors, in faraway Montreal. Satchel never could have abided the affront."
- C "It was Paige who had proved [...] 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."
- D "[Paige] 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."

4. What was a main reason why Satchel Paige felt that he should have been the first black baseball player in the Major League, instead of Jackie Robinson?

- A He was a better baseball player than Jackie Robinson, and had proven himself against the best white players.
- B He was older than Jackie Robinson, and therefore could better handle being the first black Major League baseball player.
- C He cared about civil rights issues and racial tolerance much more than Jackie Robinson did.
- D He was already prepared to be the first black Major League player because the Cleveland Indians had tried to sign him.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A Although Jackie Robinson was the first black baseball player in the Major League, most other black baseball players were resentful of his success.
- B Satchel Paige was a talented black baseball pitcher who laid the groundwork for Major League baseball to include black players like Jackie Robinson.
- C Satchel Paige was such a talented pitcher that his catchers had to cushion their gloves in order to handle his pitches.
- D Branch Rickey chose to sign Jackie Robinson to his Major League baseball team rather than Satchel Paige because Jackie was a stronger player and a more likeable person.

6. Read this quote from the text.

"'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.'"

Why might the author have included this quote from Satchel Paige's memoir?

- A to encourage the reader to read Satchel Paige's memoir
- B to prove that Satchel Paige would have been a better Major League player than Jackie Robinson
- C to indicate that somebody Satchel Paige loved had died very recently
- D to show how strongly Satchel Paige felt about not being chosen to play in the majors

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

Jackie Robinson was the first black baseball player signed from the Negro Leagues to the Major Leagues, \_\_\_\_\_ it was Satchel Paige who brought the spotlight to the Negro Leagues.

- A for instance
- B because
- C before
- D even though

**8.** How did Satchel Paige help bring the spotlight of Major League team owners' attention to the Negro Leagues?

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**9.** Why did Branch Rickey, president of the Dodgers, most likely choose to sign Jackie Robinson? Give at least two details from the text to support your answer.

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**10.** Did the Dodgers make a mistake by choosing Jackie Robinson over Satchel Paige to be their first black baseball player? Use evidence from the text to support your argument.

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