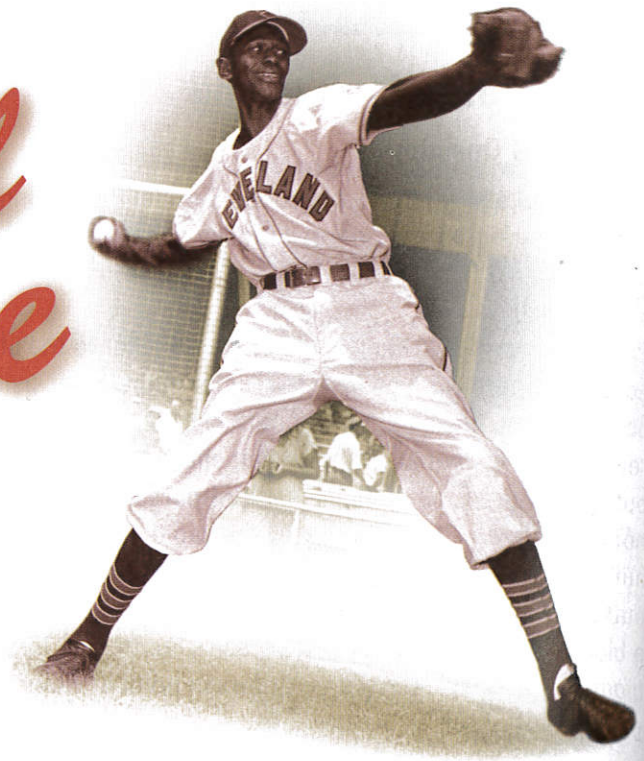


Satchel Paige



Bill Littlefield

Late in the afternoon of July 9, 1948, Leroy “Satchel” Paige began the long walk from the bullpen to the mound at Cleveland’s Municipal Stadium. He didn’t hurry. He never hurried. As he said himself, he “kept the juices flowing by jangling gently” as he moved. The crowd roared its appreciation. This was the fellow they’d come to see.

When Satchel finally reached the mound, Cleveland manager Lou Boudreau took the ball from starting pitcher Bob Lemon, who would eventually be voted into the Hall of Fame but had tired that day, and gave it to Paige. Probably he said something like, “Shut ‘em down, Satchel.” Whatever he said, Paige had no doubt heard the words a thousand times. Though he was a rookie with the Indians that year, no pitcher in the history of baseball had ever been more thoroughly prepared for a job. He kicked at the rubber, looked in for the sign, and got set to throw. In a moment, twenty-odd years later than it should have happened, Satchel Paige would deliver his first pitch in the big leagues.

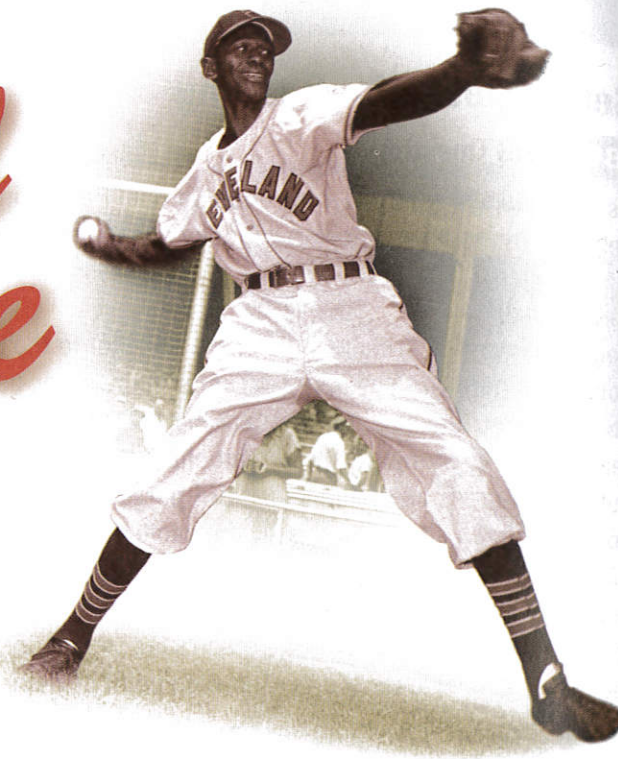
Vocabulary

appreciation (ə prē’ shē ā’ shən) *n.* high regard or gratitude

eventually (i ven’ chōō ə lē) *adv.* in the end, finally

Determine Main Idea and Supporting Details What do you think will be the main idea of this selection?

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The tall, skinny kid named Leroy Paige became Satchel Paige one day at the railroad station in Mobile, Alabama. He was carrying bags for the folks getting on and off the trains, earning all the nickels and dimes he could to help feed his ten brothers and sisters. Eventually it occurred to him that if he slung a pole across his narrow shoulders and hung the bags, or **satchels**, on the ends of the pole, he could carry for more people at once and collect more nickels and dimes. It worked, but it looked a little funny. "You look like some kind of ol' satchel tree," one of his friends told him, and the nickname stuck.

Even in those days, before he was a teenager, Satchel Paige could throw hard and accurately. Years later, Paige swore that when his mother would send him out into the yard to get a chicken for dinner, he would brain the bird¹ with a rock. "I used to kill flying birds with rocks, too," he said. "Most people need shotguns to do what I did with rocks."

It was not a talent that would go unnoticed for long. He was pitching for the semipro² Mobile Tigers before he was eighteen . . . or maybe before he was sixteen, or before he was twelve. There is some confusion about exactly when Satchel Paige was born, and Satchel never did much to clarify the matter. But there never has been any confusion about whether he could pitch. His first steady job in baseball was with the Chattanooga Black Lookouts. He was paid fifty dollars a month. In the seasons that followed he would also pitch for the Birmingham Black Barons, the Nashville Elite Giants, the Baltimore Black Sox, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, and the Kansas City Monarchs, among other teams.

¹ To **brain the bird** means "to hit it in the head."

² The prefix **semi-** means "partly" or "half." A member of a **semipro** team is paid to play part-time and may have another, full-time job. A professional player receives a full-time salary.

Visual Vocabulary

Satchels are a type of suitcase.



Determine Main Idea and Supporting Details Why do you think the author included the detail about birds and rocks?

Point of View What is the point of view? How do you know?



Satchel Paige and his teammates on the Pittsburgh Crawfords pose as the champions of the Negro National League in 1935.

If those names are not as familiar sounding as those of the New York Yankees, the Los Angeles Dodgers, or the Boston Red Sox, it's because they were all clubs in the Negro leagues, not the major leagues. Today the presence of black baseball players in the big leagues is taken for granted. Hank Aaron is the greatest of the home run hitters,³ and Rickey Henderson has stolen more bases than any other big leaguer. But before 1947, neither of them would have had the opportunity to do what they have done. Until Brooklyn Dodger general manager Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson, black players had no choice but to play for one of the all-black teams, and making that choice, they faced hardships no major-leaguer today could imagine.

Players in the Negro leagues crowded into broken-down cars and bumped over rutted roads to makeshift⁴ ball fields with lights so bad that every pitch was a potential weapon. Then they drove all night for an afternoon game three hundred miles away. On good days they played before big, appreciative crowds in parks they'd rented from the major league teams in Chicago, New York, or Pittsburgh. On bad days they learned that the team they were playing for was too broke to finish the season, and they would have to look for a healthier team that could use them, or else find a factory job.

It took talent, hard work, and a sense of humor to survive in the Negro leagues, and Satchel Paige had a lot of all three. But he didn't just survive. He prospered.

³ In 2007 Barry Bonds of the San Francisco Giants became the new home-run king with a total of 756 home runs.

⁴ A road that has been well worn by wheels or travel is *rutted*. *Makeshift* means "a temporary substitute."

Vocabulary

prospered (pros'pærd) v. flourished, was successful



The first successful Negro Baseball league was started in 1920. The Negro leagues played eleven World Series and created their own All-Star game that became the biggest black sports attraction in the country. This photograph shows players of the Negro leagues.

Determine Main Idea and Supporting Details

What main idea does the detail about broken-down cars support?

BQ BIG Question

How can a sense of humor be a source of strength? Support your answer.

Everybody knows about the fastball, the curve, and the slider. But Satchel threw a "bee" ball, which, he said, "would always *be* where I wanted it to *be*." He featured a trouble ball, which, of course, gave the hitters a lot of trouble. Even the few who could see it couldn't hit it. Sometimes he'd come at them with his hesitation pitch, a delivery so mysterious that the man at the plate would sometimes swing before the ball left Satchel's hand.

Nor was pitching his sole triumph. Early in his career Satchel Paige began building a reputation as a storyteller, a spinner of tall tales as well as shutouts. He particularly liked to recall an occasion upon which he was asked to come on in relief of a pitcher who'd left men on first and third with nobody out. "It was a tight situation," Satchel would say.

We only had a one-run lead, and that was looking mighty slim. But I had an idea. When I left the bench, I stuck a baseball in my pocket, so when the manager gave me the game ball on the mound, I had two. I went into my stretch just like usual. Then I threw one ball to first and the other to third. It was a good pick-off move, you see, and it fooled the batter, too. He swung, even though there was no ball to swing at. Those boys at first and third were both out, of course, and the umpire⁵ called strike three on the batter, so that was it for the inning. It's always good to save your strength when you can.

Major-leaguers today make enough money so that they don't have to work over the winter, but it hasn't always been so. Big-leaguers and Negro-leaguers alike used to make extra money after their regular seasons ended by putting together makeshift teams and playing each other wherever they could draw a paying crowd. This practice was called barnstorming, and Satchel Paige was the world champion at it. For thirty years, from 1929 to 1958, he played baseball summer and winter. When it was too cold to play in the Negro league cities, he played in Cuba, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. In Venezuela he battled a boa constrictor in the outfield, or so he said, and

⁵ An *umpire* is the official in a baseball game. The umpire makes sure the players follow the rules.

Point of View From what point of view is this paragraph written? How do you know?

Determine Main Idea and Supporting Details

Note the contrast in the first sentence. What do you think will be the main idea of this paragraph?

in Ciudad Trujillo⁶ he dodged the machine-gun fire of fans who'd bet on the losing team.

Throughout the early years of these adventures, the years of Satchel's prime, he often barnstormed against the best white ballplayers of his day. St. Louis Cardinal great Dizzy Dean once told him, "You're a better pitcher than I ever hope to be." Paige beat Bob Feller and struck out Babe Ruth. And when Joe DiMaggio, considered by some the most multi-talented ballplayer ever, beat out an infield hit against Paige in 1936, DiMaggio turned to his teammates and said, "Now I know I can make it with the Yankees. I finally got a hit off of ol' Satch."

Everywhere these confrontations took place, Satchel Paige would hear the same thing: "If only you were white, you'd be a star in the big leagues." The fault, of course, was not with Satchel. The fault and the shame were with major league baseball, which stubbornly, stupidly clung to the same prejudice that characterized many institutions in the United States besides baseball. Prejudice has not yet disappeared from the game. Black players are far less likely than their white counterparts⁷ to be hired as managers or general managers. But today's black players can thank Robinson, Paige, and a handful of other pioneers for the opportunities they enjoy.

Though the color line prevented Satchel Paige from pitching in the company his talent and hard work should have earned for him, he was not bitter or defeated. Ignorant white fans would sometimes taunt him, but he kept their insults in perspective. "Some of them would call you names," he said of his early years on the road, "but most of them would cheer you." Years later he worked to shrug off the pain caused by the restaurants that would not serve him, the hotels that would not rent him a room, the fans who would roar for his bee ball but would not acknowledge him on the street the next day. "Fans all holler the same at a ball game," he would say, as if the

⁶ **Ciudad Trujillo** (sē' oo dād' troo hē'yō) is the Spanish name for a city in northwestern Venezuela.

⁷ Here, **counterparts** refers to people who hold similar positions.

Point of View How does the narrator feel about the way Satchel Paige was treated?

BQ BIG Question

How does this quotation demonstrate Satchel Paige's inner strength?

racists⁸ and the racist system had never touched him at all. When he finally got the chance to become the first black pitcher in the American League at age forty-two (or forty-six, or forty-eight), he made the most of it. On that first day in Cleveland, Satchel Paige did the job he'd never doubted he could do. First he smiled for all the photographers. Then he told the butterflies in his stomach to leave off their flapping around. Then he shut down the St. Louis Browns for two innings before being lifted for a pinch hitter.

And still there were doubters. "Sure," they said to each other the next day when they read the sports section. "The old man could work two innings against the Browns. Who couldn't?"

But Satchel Paige fooled 'em, as he'd been fooling hitters for twenty-five years and more. He won a game in relief six days later, his first major league win. Then on August 3 he started a game against the Washington Senators before 72,000 people. Paige went seven innings and won. In his next two starts he threw shutouts against the Chicago White Sox, and through the waning⁹ months of that summer, his only complaint was that he was "a little tired from underwork." The routine on the major league level must have been pretty leisurely for a fellow who'd previously pitched four or five times a week.

Satchel Paige finished the 1948 season with six wins and only one loss. He'd allowed the opposing teams an average of



Satchel Paige played in his first Major League game on July 9, 1948, at age 42.

Determine Main Idea and Supporting Details What is the most important idea in this paragraph?

⁸ **Racists** believe that differences among races make their own race better than others.

⁹ Here, **waning** means "drawing to a close." In other words, the end of the summer was near.

Vocabulary

leisurely (lē'zhər lē) *adj.* unhurried, relaxed; free from the demands of work

opposing (ə pōz'ing) *adj.* competing or struggling against

just over two runs a game. Paige was named Rookie of the Year, an honor he might well have achieved twenty years earlier if he'd had the chance. The sports-writers of the day agreed that without Satchel's contribution, the Indians, who won the pennant, would have finished second at best. Many of the writers were dismayed when Satchel appeared for only two-thirds of an inning in the World Series that fall. Paige, too, was disappointed that the manager hadn't chosen to use him more, but he was calm in the face of what others might have considered an insult. The writers told him, "You sure take things good." Satchel smiled and said, "Ain't no other way to take them."

Satchel Paige outlasted the rule that said he couldn't play in the big leagues because he was black. Then he made fools of the people who said he couldn't get major league hitters out because he was too old. But his big league numbers over several years—twenty-eight wins and thirty-two saves—don't begin to tell the story of Paige's unparalleled¹⁰ career. Playing for teams that no longer exist in leagues that came and went with the seasons, Satchel Paige pitched in some 2,500 baseball games. Nobody has ever pitched in more. And he had such fun at it. Sometimes he'd accept offers to pitch in two cities on the same day. He'd strike out the side for three innings in one game, then fold his long legs into his car and race down the road toward the next ballpark. If the police could catch him, they would stop him for speeding. But when they recognized him, as often as not they'd escort him to the second game with sirens howling, well aware that there might be a riot in the park if Satchel Paige didn't show up as advertised. Once he'd arrived, he'd instruct his infielders and outfielders to sit down for an inning, then he'd strike out the side again.

For his talent, his energy, and his showmanship, Satchel Paige was the most famous of the Negro league players, but when he got some measure of recognition in the majors, he urged the writers to remember that there had been lots of other great ballplayers in those Negro league

¹⁰ If something is *unparalleled*, nothing is equal to it or better than it.

Point of View What does the narrator want you to remember?

Point of View Why don't the numbers tell the whole story? Why is it important that a biographer is telling the story?

Grammar Tip

Irregular verbs do not form their past tense by adding the ending *-ed*. Notice the word *strike* in this paragraph. What is the past tense of the verb? What other irregular verbs appear in the same paragraph?

games. He named them, and he told their stories. He made their exploits¹¹ alive and real for generations of fans who'd never have known.

In 1971, the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, inducted¹² Satchel Paige. The action was part of the Hall's attempt to remedy baseball's shame, the color line. The idea was to honor Paige and some of the other great Negro league players like Josh Gibson and Cool Papa Bell, however late that honor might come. Satchel Paige could have rejected that gesture. He could have told the baseball establishment that what it was doing was too little, too late. But when the time came for Satchel Paige to speak to the crowd gathered in front of the Hall of Fame to celebrate his triumphs, he told the people, "I am the proudest man on the face of the earth today."

Satchel Paige, whose autobiography was entitled *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*, died in Kansas City in 1982. He left behind a legend as large as that of anyone who ever played the game, as well as a long list of achievements celebrated in story and song—and in at least one fine poem, by Samuel Allen:

To Satch
Sometimes I feel like I will *never* stop
Just go on forever
Till one fine mornin'
I'm gonna reach up and grab me a
handfulla stars
Swing out my long lean leg
And whip three hot strikes burnin'
down the heavens
And look over at God and say
How about that! 🍌

Satchel Paige was the first Negro league star elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame.



¹¹ *Exploits* are brave acts or deeds.

¹² To be *inducted* is to be admitted or brought into a group. The *Baseball Hall of Fame* honors great players, managers, and broadcasters.

BQ BIG Question

From what you know of Satchel Paige's character, will he reject the gesture? How do you know?

Determine Main Idea and Supporting Details Has the biographer proved this point? If so, what details support it? Use the notes you took in your graphic organizer as evidence.