

Leroy Satchel Paige, as told to Hal Lebovitz. *Pitchin' Man: Satchel Paige's Own Story*. Revised with introduction by John Holway. Westport, CT: Meckler Publishing. 1992 (1948). Pp. xxiii. 96. Photographs, appendices. index. \$29.50.

Meckler Publishing comes forth with yet another contribution to its expanding series on Baseball and American Society in *Pitchin' Man: Satchel Paige's Own Story*, collection of journalistically produced, autobiographical interviews with arguably baseball's greatest pitcher, originally published in 1948. The book is at its best when allowing Paige's wit and sincerity to flow from its pages, and perhaps less than mediocre in providing rigorous historical documentation of the biographical details of this legendary black ballplayer whose greatest years were already past before the Major Leagues were desegregated in 1947. Nevertheless, Paige did finally achieve his dream of becoming a major-leaguer in 1948 when the World Series-bound Cleveland Indians, in an attempt to bolster their pitching staff for the pennant drive, tendered the Negro League star a contract.

It was during that season that sports journalist Hal Lebovitz interviewed Satchel Paige in order to produce an autobiographical account to appear serially in Cleveland's daily, *New's*. Due to its popularity, the feature on Paige's life was then published in book form that very year, with each daily column comprising a brief chapter. The 1992 edition reproduces the Lebovitz columns exactly as they appeared in the first edition, revised only with the addition of a new foreword by John B. Holway, considered perhaps the "dean" of the history of black baseball players and the Negro Leagues. For the contemporary reader, Holway's foreword provides crucial depth to the notion of Satchel Paige's legend and prominence in baseball history since such context, implicit in the daily circulation of 1948 sports news, is not explicit in Lebovitz' articles. In other words, Holway reminds the reader that, more than merely a jocular story-teller, Paige was a well-paid athlete with unsurpassed talent which he used to produce numerous strike-out and no-hitter records and consistently dominate white baseball stars in exhibition games.

Lebovitz made an effort to inscribe Paige's largely anecdotal and humor-laced story in the pitcher's own voice and vernacular. Paige explains

that his first name results from a childhood job carrying travelers' satchels in Mobile, Alabama. "When I was full up [with satchels], the kids couldn't see me 'cause I was camouflaged like a moving satchel tree. After that they called me 'Satchel'" (p. 17). Via such reminiscences, the chapters move quickly through Paige's life and baseball career in, approximately, the form of a chronological narrative. The most charming elements in the book, however, are those instances in which Paige responds to any one of the several legendary, perhaps even mythic, tales which enshroud him. For example, he corroborates the wealth of stories of how he would pitch without any fielders to back him up, so great was his confidence. "After we was winnin' 13-0 in the fifth innin', [the owner] called in our infield and outfield leavin' just me and my catcher. They ain't nobody on that McPherson team reached first yet" (p. 51).

Offering complementary color to Alan Klein's fine ethnography of Dominican baseball, *Sugar Ball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* (1991) is a passage in which Paige reflects on his days of pitching in the Dominican Republic in the late thirties, where he found himself in the midst of political strife being played out on the ball diamond. "One winter" he pitched for Ciudad Trujillo, the town and team named for the nation's dictatorial president who was engaged in a political struggle with opposition leaders. Paige notes playing for Trujillo's side in a series against the Estrellas de Oriente, the team sponsored by the political opposition and he vividly recalls the guns and knives that surrounded the playing field. The final game, in Ciudad Trujillo, was won by Paige and his teammates before they swiftly "escaped" to the United States the same day. Later, Paige read a commentary on Dominican baseball: "Baseball is spiritual in every respect as indulged in by the Latin races," and in response he quipped, "Them guns wasn't spiritual. But they near made a spirit out of me."

A common thread running through the chapters regards speculation of Paige's "real" age. He clearly retained a remarkable athleticism beyond his years, actually beginning his "rookie" season at age 44. He even pitched one major league game at 59, a record that still stands. But a public debate, fueled by a missing birth certificate, has always raged around the possibility that he was older yet. Unfortunately, the chapters do little to clarify this issue and even reveal Paige's own confusion about the whole affair. (Appendix A does, however, include a copy of a 1948 letter sent to Hal Lebovitz by an eyewitness claiming to have seen Paige play one year earlier than records demonstrate.)

The 1992 publication of this revised edition is conveniently situated within the context of a recent mini-cottage industry of chronicles and celebrations of the Negro League history and the lives of black baseball players. (Consider, for example, Holway, 1991, *Josh and Satch, the Life and Times of Josh Gibson anti Satchel Paige*; Fields, 1992, *My Life in the Negro Leagues. An Autobiography*; Chadwick, 1992, *When the Game Was Black and White. The Illustrated History of Baseball's Negro Leagues*.) Such a body of work is

welcomed, although its timing is somewhat ironic. This winter, as black and white baseball fans, alike, are donning manufactured replicas of the caps from the Kansas City Monarchs, Paige's now-defunct Negro League team. baseball owner Marge Schott is charged with making racial slurs and Jesse Jackson is threatening a boycott of games to protest institutionalized racism in baseball.

A reader seeking an introspective account of Paige's feelings about being denied a chance to play in the Major Leagues during his prime or his reflections on racial issues more generally need not look here. There is a danger, however, in viewing Satchel Paige—the witty, barnstorming “pitcher-for-sale” who even hinted once that he wouldn't play in the Major Leagues because they would not be able to afford him (p. 79)—as the “Little Black Sambo” of baseball. Paige, and indeed all of the players in the Negro Leagues, chipped away at the system of segregation by matching the level of play in “white” baseball, pitch for pitch. There was an interim investment in the future, when history would provide the context in which a rearticulation of the race problem—serious cultural work—could begin in baseball with Jackie Robinson's debut. And the contemporary scholar, I think, would desire a more thorough examination of the context of the “telling” of Paige's story. For example, the structures of power implicated by an American Jewish journalist writing the life story of a black baseball star in the latter's “vernacular” are conspicuous. Nevertheless, the book provides an enjoyable snapshot of the verbalizations of a great personality and a dominating athlete as they once appeared in Cleveland's daily sports pages, some 35 years ago.

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