

Young Satchel: The Origins of the Legend 1906-1931

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The early life and career of Leroy "Satchel" Paige is shrouded by a fog of mystery. Much of the uncertainty about what is true and what is illusion concerning the greatest name of the Negro leagues was created by Satchel himself; the great pitcher, almost in the manner of a modern-day rap star, created and embellished his own legend while he was still an active player. Now, however, due to the discovery of previously unknown research sources, a more complete record of the formative years of one of the game's greatest players and showmen can be established.

Using little-research box scores from obscure black newspapers of the early 20th century, records from the state reform school in Mt. Meigs, Alabama (where Satchel spent the years between 1918 and 1924), newly-discovered financial records of the Birmingham Black Barons of the 1920s, and new interviews with surviving contemporaries, a flesh-and-blood Leroy Paige emerges to stand in comparison with the mythical Satchel. In this research statistical analysis is used to compare the accomplishments of the young pitcher to other Negro League stars of the era ("Bullet Joe" Rogan, "Rube" Foster, etc.) as well as to dominant white pitchers ("Lefty" Grove, Walter Johnson, etc.). Satchel's reminiscences of his early days (many recorded decades after the fact) are also compared to known events; helping to document where legend and fact agree.

This paper is not a debunking exhibition; the greatness of Satchel Paige has been established beyond doubt. However, it is necessary, before facts recede further into the mists of baseball history, to retrieve the human Satchel: to make reasonable comparisons between this outstanding ballplayer and other outstanding ballplayers to find the real roots of the figure of American folklore. The paper identifies the forces that shaped this young man and transformed him from a petty criminal at the age of 12 to the best-known black athlete in America by the time he was 25. It also focuses on the world Satchel inhabited in his early years. The segregated South of his youth and the segregated baseball of his first 42 years are examined. Satchel's family and community, obviously important in his development, receives more scrutiny than in most research works. All in all, this is a portrait of the legend as a young man - warts, and greatness.