

Review Article

Baseball Biographies: The Darling of Whiteball and the Epicentre of Blackball

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Leroy (Satchel) Paige as told to David Lipman, *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993 (originally published by Doubleday, 1962). Illus. pp. xiv + 295. \$US10.95 paper.

Mark Ribowsky, *Don't Look Back: Satchel Paige - In The Shadows of Baseball*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994. Illus. pp. 351. \$37.00.

Marshall Smelser, *The Life that Ruth Built: A Biography*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993 (originally published by New York Times Book Co., 1975). Illus. pp. xiv + 592. \$US16.95 paper.

Americans, that is those who inhabit the United States, regard baseball as being their national pastime. A simple game, involving little more than a stick, a ball and a patch of ground, baseball is the most widely played and watched sport in the United States. The dynamic of baseball, the game within the game, is the battle between pitcher and batter. The task of a pitcher is to retire a batter, while that of a batter is to hit the ball to all parts, or out of the park

Arguably, the best batter, or hitter, in the history of baseball is George Herman 'Babe' Ruth (1895-1948). Conceivably, and more controversially, the most able pitcher the game has ever seen is Leroy 'Satchel' Paige (1906-1982). Both were colossuses who in markedly different ways bestrode the world of baseball. The reissue of Marshall Smelser's *The Life That Ruth Built*, originally published in 1975, and

Satchel Paige's autobiography *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*, published previously in 1962, together with Simon and Schuster's publication of Mark Ribowsky's masterly biography *Don't Look Back: Satchel Paige in the Shadow of Baseball*, provide a basis for reassessing their roles in baseball.

In many ways the history of these two great ballplayers is similar. Both were born into poverty (though Satch's circumstances were worse than the Babe's), were truants from school and spent their times in the streets finding themselves involved in varying degrees of mischief. Both were committed to reform schools in their childhood. Ruth was sent to the St Mary's Industrial School for wayward lads in Baltimore, run by Xavarian brothers, at age seven because he was 'beyond the control' of his parents. At age twelve Paige was committed to the Industrial School for Negro children in Mt. Meigs, Alabama. He had been caught stealing jewellery and had developed into a thief stealing satchels at the railway station, from whence he obtained his nickname. In his autobiography Paige claims that his nickname was derived from bags he toted around a factory. The Babe derived his nickname from his youthful looks when he first signed as a professional player.

Both learnt or were tutored in the skills of baseball at their respective boys' homes. The Babe seems to have enjoyed his time at St Mary's while Satchel refers kindly to his years at Mt. Meigs. Upon graduating from their respective 'alma maters' both pursued successful careers in baseball and amassed high incomes - though in both baseball and money terms Babe's success was quicker and larger than Satch's. Both were profligate spendthrifts and womanisers/lechers. The Babe slowed down and lived a 'respectable' life following his second marriage to Claire Hodgson in his mid thirties. Satchel was unable to contain or discipline his nocturnal needs, much to the chagrin of his second wife Lahoma Brown and his family. Both men had a taste for expensive and fast cars and probably set all time records for their accumulation of speeding tickets. Finally, both men found their way into baseball's Hall of Fame.

Having said this, the two were poles apart, as different as black and white. Ruth is more simple and straightforward than Paige - like comparing a 'babe' to a man on the run. Ruth was uncomplicated, a person of bonhomie-and good cheer and generous to a fault; something he could afford because of his fame and the wealth that seemed to endlessly flow in his direction. While the Babe had his spats with other players and confrontations with the powers that be, he was generally regarded as one of the boys and a source of fun. He enjoyed being liked. Paige, on the other hand was a more complicated person who hid himself behind a mask. He was a very private man who never seems to have had any real friends. He played baseball to derive enough 'green stuff' to pay for his vices. Satchel always worried only about number one.

The real difference between Paige and Ruth, of course, is that they lived in two different United States of Americas. Ruth was the darling of whiteball; while Paige, if not the darling, was certainly the epicentre of blackball. During his prime Paige was denied the chance to display his talents in the 'big-time' because of the colour of his skin. 'Organised' baseball operated a colour bar. Paige was forced, as were countless other black athletes, to perform for various teams in the different competitions that comprised the negro leagues. In addition, one to never worry about a contract, he took up with various teams on barnstorming tours all over North and Latin America if the price was right, Numerous baseball 'sugar daddies' over the length and breadth of the Americas fell in love with Satch's skills on the mound. In barnstorming games Satch was able to pit his skills against whites, and there was nothing he liked more than winning a pitching duel against a big league white pitcher and/or striking out big league white boys.

Throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s Paige's skill and fame prospered. His presence in a game guaranteed crowds, whether it be blackball or barnstorming. He hopped from gig to gig, taking the cash and moving on, unless some female friends provided a reason to hang around. In the early 1940s, with many major league players drafted into

the war effort, Paige was earning an annual income of \$40 000. Ribowsky speculates that at that time he may have been the world's highest paid athlete. On several occasions major league pitchers he encountered praised Satch as one of, if not the greatest, pitcher they had ever seen. As Satch said of himself, his control was such that he could 'nip frosting off a cake'. With the rise of blackball in the 1930s and 1940s, its array of talent, and increasing crowds there were rumblings from the press, mainly black, that baseball's 'apartheid' should come to an end.

In 1945 Branch Rickey of Brooklyn Dodger fame signed Jackie Robinson which began a trickle of blacks into the majors (see Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and his Legacy*, Vintage, New York, 1983). Satch was miffed that he was not the first black so signed - not that he spoke out against Robinson (most leading black players of this era felt that Robinson was second rate). He longed to play in the majors. As he entered his forties he despaired that he would be passed over. In 1948, at age forty-two, he was signed by Bill Veeck of the Cleveland Indians. He helped the Indians clinch a pennant and pitched two-thirds of an inning in the 1948 World Series - which the Indians won. Paige spent 1949 with the Indians and 1951 to 1953 with the St Louis Browns, and was still pitching minor league and barnstorming into his fifties. In 1965 Charles O Finley had him pitch three innings for the Kansas City Athletics. Despite not having played ten years in the majors he was, by the force of media and public pressure, elected to baseball's Hall of Fame in 1971; though a furore arose over a proposal to place him with other greats of the blackball era in a 'segregated' part of the Hall.

Smesler's biography of Ruth provides exhaustive details of his skill and daring on the baseball field. Ruth slugged his way into immortality. Information is provided on Ruth's days as a pitcher, his switch to a hitter, his move from the Boston Red Sox to the New York Yankees and his last inglorious season with the Boston Braves. He also explains Babe's impact on the game, how he transformed it from the

inside or scientific mode with its emphasis on bunting, running and stealing to the power game of blasting a ball out of the park. In so doing, Smesler provides insights into the major personalities and players who were part of Babe Ruth's orbit. He is somewhat coy about Ruth's womanising and carousing and a tad defensive about devoting a magnum opus to a ballplayer - even to one who 'so stirred our imaginations ...[and] captured our affections' (p. 560).

Paige's autobiography is basically self-serving and written in the tradition of a glory book - as are most sporting autobiographies. He tones down the seamier aspects of his life (who wouldn't?): his youthful indiscretions, his lust for money and women, his habitual carousing and financial problems and conflicts that surrounded his life as a ballplayer. He only briefly touches on aspects of his relationship with his families and the racism he encountered living in 'the land of the free'.

Ribowsky's biography of Paige should properly be regarded as a masterpiece of not only baseball but also of American history. Not only does he provide an account of Paige the baseballer and man but also manages to situate him in the maelstrom that was organised baseball, blackball and barnstorming. Ribowsky lays bare the underside of the world of baseball. Paige strutted his stuff around gangsters and sharp operators (even dictators - in the political sense) and was always his own man. He refused to allow himself to be intimidated. If those he dealt with would not play ball on his terms he would simply move on to another gig. Satchel Paige made his own luck, his own history, against the odds in an activity that passes for the United States of America's national pastime.