

My Birthday Present By Larry Lester

This is the season of Satchel Paige anniversaries.

There is the 100th of his birth, or at least when he is believed to have been born since his actual birthday remains as mysterious as Satchel wanted it to be. There is the 60th of Bill Veeck signing Paige to play for the Cleveland Indians, which happened on the day Satchel turned 42. Then there is an anniversary more personal to me that gave birth to this story and which, like the others, centers around the pitcher who may have been the fastest and certainly the most entertaining ever to ascend the mound.

I recall that last one as if it were last week. I can hear the ticket seller crowing, “Hurray, hurray, step right up. The World’s Greatest Pitcher – Guaranteed to Strike Out the First Nine Men.” No question, “Leeeee-Roy Satchel Paaaiiggge” had always been a hawker’s best friend.

His first outing in the majors drew 78,382, the most ever for a night game. His first start – a 5-3 win over the Washington Senators – brought in 72,434. None of which was surprising to those who had been watching Satchel fill Negro League stadiums for more than 20 years from Miami to Anchorage, Puerto Rico to Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

He still was a huge draw, if not quite the “world’s greatest,” that night in 1965 when I saw Satchel pitch for Charlie O. Finley’s Kansas City A’s. Grandpa Paige, whom Finley had coaxed out of retirement for one-more grand go-around, had just celebrated his 59th birthday. I had heard, and read, of the exploits of the tall, talkative, talented pitcher, but having lived through a mere 15 seasons, I had never had the chance until then to see him pitch.

I got to the game against the Boston Red Sox early and purchased my ticket along the first base line. In recognition of Paige’s days in the Negro Leagues, the Athletics brought onto the field several former Kansas City Monarch legends like Eldridge “Chilli” Mayweather, John “Buck” O’Neil, James “Cool Papa” Bell, and Alfred “Slick” Surratt, along with future Hall of Famers Hilton Smith and Wilber “Bullet” Rogan. As they were introduced, they doffed their caps or raised their hands to acknowledge the crowd.

Game time was the twilight of 5:30, a metaphor for the oldest man ever to suit up for a professional baseball game. The theme song was equally fitting: “Salute to Satchel Paige.” The crowd read a playful poem by match light as Satchel sat in the bullpen, swaying back and forth in a Finley-supplied rocking chair, with a nurse, Sandra Damon, rubbing his arm.

As the stadium lights came back on, the umpire shouted, “Let’s Play Ball”

According to my scorecard, Satch had a shaky start. After getting Sox centerfielder Jim Gosger to pop up, the A’s first baseman Santiago Rosario booted Dalton

Jones' dribbler. Next, Paige's catcher Bill Bryan matadored a Paige fast ball, allowing Jones to advance to second. But wait, Jones tried to taffy the catcher's error by going to third and Bryan nailed him with a perfect strike to Wayne Causey, for the second out of the inning.

Working the corners against the next batter, future Hall of Famer Carl Yastremski, Paige fell behind in the count, 3-0. Yaz blasted the next room-service pitch off the left field wall for a double. Paige dug into his bag of tricks, started, stopped, sputtered with a hiccup windup and got the dangerous Tony Conigliaro to pop up on his hesitation pitch. Paige had thrown a total of 14 pitches in the first inning.

After some gentle shoulder rubbing by the nurse in her lily-white uniform, with matching shoes and hat, Paige wasted no time in the second inning and retired the side in order, on only six pitches; getting Thomas to pop up, Mantilla to ground out, short to first and Bressoud flying out to right field. Three up, three down.

The third inning was just as easy, as he set down the first two batters on five pitches, including striking out Boston pitcher, Bill Monbouquette, on three offerings. He closed out the inning, getting Gosger to ground out, short to first. In all, he threw 28 pitches over three frames.

To give Paige his proper accolades, manager Haywood "Hollywood" Sullivan allowed him to warm up on the mound to start the fourth inning. After a few tosses and a brief conference, Sullivan waved in Diego Segui from the bullpen. Following the Hollywood script, we gave Satchel a standing ovation, as we sung "The Old Gray Mare." He saluted the cheers with a wave of his cap, his swan song to the evening and the game.

Rather than trust my memory of that historic outing, or my tattered scorecard, I wrote to players on both teams in August of 1990, some 25 years after the fact. I was surprised how many wrote back.

A's pitcher Rollie Sheldon remembered Paige that night as "confident, relaxed, and with the fans behind him. He threw his famous hesitation pitch to Tony C. He double clutched twice and he hit a feeble pop up to third base."

Catcher Billy Bryan, asked how often he signaled for the hesitation pitch, recounted, "He did this on his own a lot, so he would sometimes have you reaching for the ball before it got there." That may explain Bryan's passed ball in the first inning. "Of course, at the age of Satch at this point," Bryan added, "he was not overpowering, but still had his great control, and command of location of his pitches."

Some had a different prospective that day. "I was playing third and to be perfectly honest it was a little scary," said Wayne Causey, "because Satch wasn't throwing very hard."

Diego Segui recalled that “As I looked at him, I thought about his record in the Negro Leagues and wondered what kind of records he would have set had he been given the opportunity to pitch in the major leagues. No one would be able to achieve the amazing feats that he accomplished. It was a privilege for me, who admired him, to relieve him in his last appearance.”

“Given the circumstances that Mr. Paige experienced, he could have been bitter at not been given the opportunity to pitch in the majors during his lengthy career, but he rose above it. And did the most to his ability and carried himself proudly. He is a man people can look up to.”

Rene Lacheman recalled Satchel as “one of the funniest players I have met. I could listen to his stories of his career all day. He never told us how old he was but you could tell that he was a great athlete as well as one of the greatest pitchers ever.”

Boston ace Monbouquette called Paige “Awesome! We had one hit, a double by Carl. I remember our guys saying, I am going to hit one off the old man. He mowed us down like taking candy from a baby.”

Another great pitcher, Blue Moon Odom, said that “It was a game that will live on in my mind always. I was a 20-year old, playing with the legendary Satchel Paige . . . Satchel was a man whom every young pitcher looked up to. He made everyone feel special.”

Dick Radatz, Boston’s bullpen wizard and one of the hardest-throwing pitchers ever, echoed the sentiments of nearly everyone on the field or in the stands that day: “I would have been good to see him at 25 instead of probably 60-65.”

At the time of Paige’s age-defying appearance against Radatz and his Red Sox teammates, I lived just five blocks from Kansas City’s Municipal Stadium – and Cinderella’s clock was ticking for me, too. I had left my two younger sisters, Cookie and Brenda, at home by themselves. They had promised not to tattle on me, but only if I could get back before daddy. As I ran through the front door I could hear my father come in through the back. We met half way into the house. Of course, I was loaded down with a game program, ball cap, and other diamond goodies. I smelt like hotdogs, burnt popcorn and cracker jacks. I was flat busted. Boy, was I in a heap of trouble!

My father went baritone and demanded, “Did you leave your sisters at home by themselves?” I froze like a batter looking at a third strike. For a moment I thought, “Should I even bother to answer?” I was speechless and just waited for the guillotine to drop!

Suddenly, a voice emerged from the bedroom. I looked up and it was my grandmother from Fort Smith, Arkansas. Grandma Geraldine Williams had come to help celebrate my mother’s 36th birthday. Knowing her grandson’s love for the game, she put

her hands on her hips and she proudly lied and said, “George, I’ve been with the girls all evening.”

If it hadn’t been for my mother’s birthday, I probably wouldn’t be alive today to celebrate Satch’s 100th birthday. Happy Birthday, Mr. Paige.

The Box Score from the Kansas City Star, September 26, 1965

BOSTON	AB	R	H	RBI	PO	A
Gosner, cf	4	1	1	0	0	0
Jones, 3b	3	0	0	0	1	0
Malzone, 3b	1	0	0	0	1	0
Yastrzemski, lf	4	1	2	0	6	0
Conigliaro, rf	3	2	2	2	1	0
Thomas, 1b	3	1	1	2	10	0
Mantilla, 2b	4	0	1	0	0	0
Bressoud, ss	4	0	0	0	2	0
Ryan, c	4	0	0	0	6	1
Monbouquette, p	4	0	0	0	0	1
Totals	34	5	7	4	27	9

KANSAS CITY	AB	R	H	RBI	PO	A
Campaneris, ss	4	0	0	0	1	3
Tartabull, cf	4	1	2	0	2	0
Causey, 3b	3	0	0	0	2	0
Bryan, c	4	1	2	1	7	2
Green, 2b	4	0	2	1	1	1
Rosario, 1b	4	0	1	0	8	1
Hershberger, rf	3	0	0	0	2	0
Reynolds, lf	3	0	0	0	3	0
Paige, p	1	0	0	0	0	0
Segui, p	1	0	0	0	1	0
Stahl, p	1	0	0	0	0	0
Mossi, p	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wyatt, p	0	0	0	0	0	0
Akers, p	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	32	2	7	2	27	7

BOSTON	000	000	230	5
KANSAS CITY	100	001	000	2

E - Rosario, DP - Boston 1, (Mantilla, Bressoud, Thomas),
 Left on Base - Boston 4, Kansas City 4, 2B - Yastrezmski,
 Bryan, HR Thomas (21), Conigliaro (31).

PITCHING	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO
Boston						

Monbouquette (W, 10-10)	9	7	2	2	1	5
Kansas City						
Paige	3	1	0	0	0	1
Segui	4	3	2	2	1	4
Mossi (L, 5-7)	1/3	1	1	1	0	1
Wyatt	1/3	2	2	2	1	1
Aker	1 1/3	0	0	0	0	1

WP - Segui, PB - Bryan 2, Time - 2:14, Attendance - 9,289
 Umpires - Valentine, McKinley, Soar.

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