



Crossover Star

The legacy of one-of-a-kind Negro Leagues phenom Satchel Paige endures in pop culture.

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

The preamble to the average big-time sporting event has become a pop culture moment unto itself, with players treating the pedestrian commute from their subterranean parking spaces to the locker room like a catwalk, cameras trained on their every move.

As fashion statements go, you'd be hard pressed to top that of the NFL's Patrick Mahomes before the Kansas City Chiefs played host to the Indianapolis Colts on a Sunday night last October, the Chiefs' first primetime game of the season.

Like Wyatt Earp stalking into the O.K. Corral, Mahomes swaggered into Arrowhead Stadium in a red-and-white Kansas City Monarchs jersey over a white hoodie, sending pro football fans scrambling to their smart devices to unpack his layered tribute.

Besides paying homage to his city, the MVP quarterback called out his own deep baseball lineage. His father, Pat, pitched in the big leagues for the better part of 11 seasons. His godfather, LaTroy Hawkins, another long-time MLB pitcher, was a former teammate of Pat's. And Mahomes himself pitched at Texas Tech before making the full-time switch to football his junior year of college.

What's more, Mahomes was celebrating the Negro Leagues and its longest-running team on the 13th anniversary of the passing of Buck O'Neil, a former player-manager who'd go on to become a leading ambassador for the segregated game. But the kicker was the No. 25 jersey itself, a 1942 replica of the one worn by a Negro Leagues standout named Satchel Paige.



Satchel Paige poses with a 45-pound catfish he caught following a scoreless relief appearance for the St. Louis Browns against the Detroit Tigers on June 27, 1952. The photo ran in the *New York World-Telegram* and was representative of Paige's celebrity throughout not only the baseball world but also in pop culture.

"I wish I could tell you that it was my brilliant marketing idea," said Negro Leagues Baseball Museum president Bob Kendrick, who was flooded with interest after Mahomes' gesture. "But I can't. His folks actually called us."

You could say that Leroy Robert Paige was the Patrick Mahomes of his day. But in truth, the Mobile, Ala.-born hurler, who reportedly got his nickname porting bags as a child and whose parents inserted an "i" into their surname "to sound more high-tone," was bigger.

He was a lanky and loquacious superstar who threw hard, lived harder and broke attendance records just about everywhere he went. A once-in-a-generation talent, Paige

hung in long enough to cross over into the major leagues in 1948, the year after Jackie Robinson broke the color line, and proved good enough in his 40s to be named an All-Star twice. He also became the first African American to pitch in the World Series when Cleveland beat the Boston Braves in the 1948 Fall Classic.

All the while, Paige cultivated an air of intrigue around his exact birth date. In a 1971 appearance on *What's My Line* as the mystery guest, he joked, "I'm the oldest man in the United States that don't nobody know nothin' about his age." At other times, he'd kid that a goat had eaten the Bible containing his birth certificate and "the midwife died and all the books burned up."

His preternatural ball control made him every bit as cocky as Jack Johnson before him and Muhammad Ali after. On barnstorming national tours with the Negro Leagues, he famously ordered his outfielders to take a seat in the grass before striking out the side. He gave his pitches names like "trouble ball" and "midnight rider."

But Paige tempered his boastfulness with a personality that was winsome, infectious and bursting with enthusiasm for the game. In short, he was the total package — a silver-tongued self-promoter, too. And people couldn't help but buy what he was selling.

"He had the look, the style — he had mad swag," Kendrick said. "If he was doing it in this era of social media, I'm not sure there'd be anybody you could compare him to."

By his own reckoning, Paige played in more than 2,600 games for at least 13 teams over the better part of four decades. And in a fitting farewell, he allowed one lone hit in his final three innings on the mound — when he started for MLB's Kansas City Athletics in 1965 at the ripe age of 59. And he surely would have been officially credited with more than 28 wins and 288 strikeouts if Negro Leagues records were added in. (Paige also figured he had thrown at least 55 no-hitters.)

Since suffering a fatal heart attack in June 1982, a month before his (alleged) 76th birthday, Paige has abided as a symbol of durability and perseverance in the zeitgeist.

In the '60s and early '70s, Paige was a regular on the TV guest-star circuit, appearing on everything from *The Tonight Show* to *Dinah's Place*. He filled the big screen as a buffalo soldier

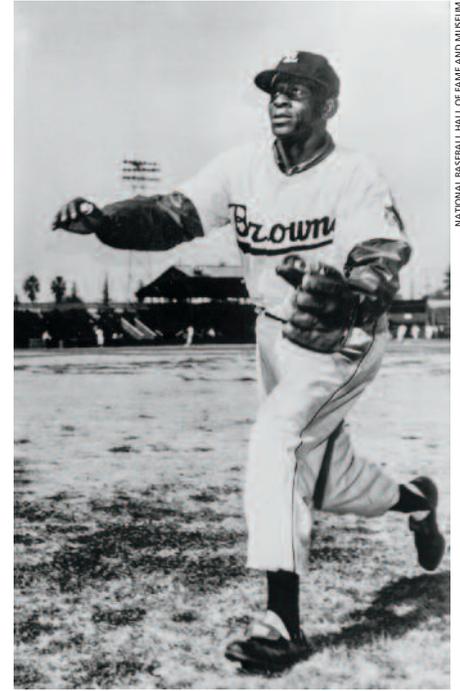


Satchel Paige (right), then playing for the Kansas City Monarchs, shares a laugh with Yankees star Lefty Gomez. Paige's ability and charisma made him a national celebrity even before Jackie Robinson integrated Organized Baseball in 1946. Paige debuted in the majors in 1948 for the Cleveland Indians, helping them to the World Series championship.

in the 1959 spaghetti western *The Wonderful Country* and played himself in the 1949 sports drama *The Kid from Cleveland*. One of the great thrills of Paige's life, reportedly, was serving as

an advisor on the 1981 made-for-TV biopic *Don't Look Back*, which starred Louis Gossett Jr.

He's since been immortalized in a movie (by the eminent Delroy Lindo in the 1996



Satchel Paige spent three seasons with the St. Louis Browns, the best of those coming in 1952 when he went 12-10 with a 3.07 ERA in 46 appearances. Paige also pitched in the majors for the Indians and the Athletics.

straight-to-cable classic *Soul of the Game*) and as a bobblehead (voiced by the inimitable Tracy Morgan in the 2005 comedy *Are We There Yet?*). Director/seamhead Woody Allen even named his first-born son (ace investigative reporter Ronan Farrow) "Satchel."

And then, of course, there was the social media trendsetting fashion statement by Mahomes, who visited the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum as Kendrick's guest as a Chiefs rookie in 2017 and clearly held fast to that experience. He not only wore the Paige jersey to the game, but also put it back on for the news conference afterward.

"My dad always told me about Satchel Paige," he told reporters. "He and my godfather, they looked up to him and all the different stuff that he did on the mound, as far as the theatrics. Obviously, he was a great pitcher."

And one has to figure that when Mahomes lifted the Lombardi Trophy in the confetti-filled air a few months later, after being named MVP of Super Bowl LIV, somewhere up in the heavens Satch was smiling. 🍌

Andrew Lawrence is an award-winning writer based in Beaufort, S.C., whose work has appeared in Sports Illustrated, Men's Health and The Guardian.