Josh and Satch: The Life and Times of Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige Short Guide

Josh and Satch: The Life and Times of Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige by John B. Holway

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

The two most famous players from the Negro leagues are Josh Gibson, a slugging catcher with awesome home run power, and Satchel Paige, a smart and devious pitcher with a wicked fastball. In Josh and Satch, Holway tells the story of their lives, of how their fates intertwined, and how each eventually met a different fate, perhaps dictated by their different personalities. In the process of anchoring the two super players in the context of their times, Holway offers a fine account of American social history and provides an entertaining sketch of the rough-and-tumble Negro leagues of the 1920s into the 1950s, portraying ballplayers in all their delightful eccentricities and detailing their often tragic lives. Josh and Satch is ultimately an account of how one man overcame racism and great adversity and how another perished in bitterness and anguish.

About the Author

John Holway was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, on November 12, 1929 to Edward J. Holway, an engineer, and Frances (nee Rimbach) Holway. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1950 from the University of Iowa. He joined the United States Army in 1951, and while in the service met his future wife Motoka Mori whom he married on October 15, 1954. They have two boys and two girls. Holway reached the rank of first lieutenant in the Army, but he left the service in 1956 and then started to work for the United States Information Service. This job has provided his primary source of income while he has pursued his literary interests.

His first books were the sports volumes Japan Is Big League in Thrills (1955) and Sumo (1957), although his articles appeared in Look, American Heritage, and other general readership magazines before he began to publish the books for which he is best known. His longtime hobby has been studying Josh and Satch: The Life and Times of Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige 4725 the Negro leagues of the days when African-Americans were excluded from the National League and the American League (he usually refers to these as the "white leagues," which is a bit of a misnomer because all other ethnic groups, including nonwhite ones, were allowed to have players in the Major Leagues). As part of his hobby, he tracked down and interviewed former Negro league ballplayers, in the process amassing an enormous amount of information on the players, coaches, and owners for Negro league teams. Holway recalls hunting down Satchel Paige and being told by a boy working in the front yard that no one named Satchel Paige lived in the house; a call to Paige's agent and a check for $250 changed the situation, and when Holway returned to interview Paige the boy answered the door and then led him to the renowned ex-player.

The first book to result from Holway's diligent digging into the past is Voices of the Great Black Baseball Leagues, published in 1975, featuring excerpts from interviews of those who played on Negro league teams. Holway also began to uncover many of the details of player biographies and player performances that now form the basis for information in such standard reference works as The Baseball Encyclopedia (ed. Rick Wolff, et al., New York: Macmillan, ninth edition, 1993). Holway's interest in history as well as baseball led to Blackball Stars: Negro League Pioneers, a gathering of profiles of some of the most famous players from the Negro leagues. This volume marks the beginning of a string of historical books that have established Holway as one of the most prominent writers of history for general audiences. Holway's historical research has expanded beyond baseball and has resulted in what may be Holway's most popular title, Red Tails, Black Wings: The Men of America's Black Air Force (1997).

Setting

Josh and Satch spans the Americas from the United States to Argentina, following the exploits of two itinerant baseball players as they switch from one professional league to another in order to play baseball all year and to earn livings for themselves and their families. Satchel Paige wandered more than Josh Gibson did, pursuing places where money was most plentiful.

Sometimes he devoted himself to playing for a Negro league team; sometimes he played in Latin America; much of the time he toured the western United States, barnstorming with other African- American players in countless games against local semiprofessional teams. Paige early in his career became a big-name draw for fans, and he often received a percentage of gate receipts just for showing up to a game and pitching only two or three innings. He had become nationally famous by the 1930s, and Negro league teams would borrow him from his parent club to pitch a weekend game for them, just to draw enough fans to make the week's team payroll.

Like Paige, Gibson would barnstorm, but he tended to stick with his own Negro league team more than Paige did with his. Although a popular figure in America, Gibson was even more celebrated in Latin America, especially in Mexico where team owners would often pay him much more to play for them than American teams would because of his enormous drawing power for Mexican fans.Josh and Satch touches on much that is brutal, painful, and humiliating as it travels through the American South of segregation where, one player says, a team bus might have to travel fifty miles to find one service station that would let black players use the facilities. It travels through big cities such as Pittsburgh and Birmingham, and little hamlets so small that their names may not appear on road maps; the ball parks may be big major league ones such as Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., to others built for Negro league teams, to others that were more gravel than dirt with old wooden grand stands. In some towns the only reason a Negro league team was allowed in unmolested was because Satchel Paige was a member; in other towns the players had to pass the hat for donations from the crowd, dividing the take among themselves.

Two Negro leagues flourished in the 1920s when Gibson and Paige begin their professional careers. The showmanship, creativity, and fancy plays of the Negro leaguers drew white as well as black fans, and teams could afford to devote their seasons to league play, up to one hundred games in a season. The stability of the 1920s died with the Great Depression, during which over one fourth of American workers had no jobs. The money that had been available for spending on recreation declined, and with its decline came a precipitous drop in attendance at Negro league games. Some teams died, and others were reincarnated as independent clubs that played exhibitions against major league clubs, all star clubs, and Negro league teams. It was particularly tough for Negro leaguers to make a living during the 1930s, and the surviving teams played only short seasons against each other, as few as thirty games, with the majority of the time being devoted to lengthy playoff systems and all star games that would draw fan interest. Negro league all star games were held in Chicago's

American League ballpark and were among the major sporting events of the 1930s, filling the park with fans.

Paige and Gibson were often the heroes of these games, with Gibson one year hitting one of his legendary home runs out of the ballpark, perhaps over 550 feet from home plate.

Holway is a careful chronicler of events and settings; a good example being the care with which he illustrates Gibson's tremendous hitting power by offering independent eyewitness testimony from different vantage points to his herculean blasts. He spent about thirty years researching the background for Josh and Satch, not only reading newspaper accounts of games and other books about the Negro leagues, but interviewing hundreds of players and other witnesses to the events he describes. The result is an especially vivid portrait of people and places.

Literary Qualities

Most of Josh and Satch consists of chapters focused on year-by-year accounts of the achievements of Paige and Gibson. The focus is on baseball exploits, with the players' private lives sketched in only as background for the players' public lives. One effect this focus has is to make the world outside of baseball seem remote, even World War II seems like a faraway event.

Holway compensates for this by introducing each chapter with a catalogue of important world and national events that took place during the year the chapter covers. Readers of biographies for young adults are likely to be familiar with this technique, appearing as it does in such popular books as Ann Petry's Harriett Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad (1955; see separate entry, Vol 2).

Josh and Satch is full of statistics, presenting accounts of how many home runs Gibson hit in a given season, how many wins Paige may have recorded, and other such details that are likely to appeal to readers who have a special interest in the sport of baseball. He also describes playing styles; how one player always batted flat-footed or how a pitcher threw mostly curve balls. This may be dull to a reader who is not interested in the sport, but Holway takes care to offer other matters likely to appeal to such a reader. His narrative provides much insight into the everyday life of the period he covers, from how players dealt with daily racial discrimination to how they responded to the early days of the civil rights movement. He also achieves the often tricky feat of leavening serious subjects with wit and good humor. A representative example of humor occurred when many Negro leaguers jumped their teams one season for the opportunity to play for more money in Santo Domingo, then ruled by the dictator Rafael Trujillo. Players on Trujillo's personal ball club found themselves under special pressure: "'El Presidente doesn't lose!' the militia shouted, firing rifles into the air for emphasis."

Games were often surrounded by armed troops. "'They don't kill people over baseball?' Bell asked. 'Down here they do,' he was told." Cool Papa Bell's line is funny, and it also underscores the adventure that underlies much of the narrative.

Bell is also an illustration of Holway's conscientious effort to cover those details of the Negro leagues that many readers would be curious about.

For instance, Paige often said that Bell could turn off the light switch and be in bed before the lights went out; this is a famous witticism that emphasized Bell's great foot speed, but it turns out sional teams in Wichita, Kansas (which they easily won), their hotel announced that they had no rooms for Paige and Radcliffe. The team owner threatened a lawsuit, but Paige said not to worry, he and Radcliffe would stay at the boardinghouse of a friend; this suited him well because he could go in and out at all hours of the night and even entertain lady friends without the restrictions such as curfews that the rest of the team endured at the hotel; the team owner felt bad about the situation and visited Paige and the catcher at the boardinghouse every day, giving them

extra money each visit. Paige and Radcliffe never let on that they were happier where they were than they would have been at the hotel.

Holway often refers to the National League and the American Leagues as the "white leagues." This convenient phrase is not entirely accurate. Although Jews had difficulty making their way into the major leagues, they did do it, and the leagues at one time or another had players of many ethnic groups, not all white. Native American players had been in the leagues from the beginning; one starred in Cleveland and the Indians were eventually named for him, and Jim Thorpe, who played in the National League from 1913 through 1919, is still a famous all-around athlete. So the major leagues were not exclusively white but tried to be exclusively non-black. African-Americans were singled out for exclusion. On the other hand, if the major leagues were not entirely "white," they were not really "major," either. If great athletes such as Gibson and Paige were excluded, then inferior ones played instead of them. As Paige points out in other books, if he and some of the other outstanding Negro league pitchers of his time had been allowed to play in the major leagues then the gaudy batting averages of some big-league stars would have lost several points. Historians of baseball also often speculate on what hitters such as Gibson and Oscar Charleston would have done to major league earned run averages.

Another interesting social problem for Negro leaguers was a conflict between Northerners and Southerners.

The Northerners tended to be from urban areas; they were well educated and proud of it. As one explains in Josh and Satch, they dressed in suits and ties like gentlemen, and they spoke the careful diction of educated men; they considered Southerners such as Paige to be "clowns." They were offended by their casual clothes at meals and their sloppy English; they also disliked the gaming, singing, and music that were important parts of the culture of the Southerners. Jake Stephens, a shortstop, explains: You take Satchel and those, they were all southern boys. They lived a different life than we lived. We didn't even much associate with them off the ball field, because they were what you'd call clowns. They didn't dress the way we dressed, they didn't have the same mannerisms, the same speech. Paige was a big mouth, didn't have any education, saying, "You all" and stuff like that.

And you have this other problem with southern boys. They've never been used to making money. Give them $150 a month, first thing you know they go all haywire, living on top of the world, walking around with their jackets on: "Pittsburgh Crawfords." The older fellows, we had neckties on when we went to dinner, I mean because that's how you were supposed to do. You're a gentleman, you're a big-timer.

Thus there tended to be antagonism, with Northerners believing the Southern players presented an image that fed offensive racial stereotypes and the Southerners seeming to think the Northern players were stuck-up stuffed shirts. This division among the players persisted throughout the period covered by Josh and Satch.

Books about the hardscrabble days of baseball, especially very realistic ones such as Josh and Satch, often feature raw language, but some readers may be relieved to learn that Josh and Satch eschews cussing. This may be partly due to the players themselves; stereotypes are often misleading, and the stereotype of the hard-cussing ballplayer may be one of them. In Holway's interviews, players often use phrases such as "so and so" to represent some foul language; it is possible that Holway silently reworded what the players said to make the language more suitable for general audiences, but the euphemisms sound genuine, and Holway makes the point that players were conscious of the effect their speech had on others. The "cussing" may be absent because the players refrained from cursing while being interviewed.

Themes and Characters

Josh and Satch is about two men who endured many of the same cruel difficulties that were part of being an African-American athlete in the days of racial segregation; they also shared triumphs, with each becoming known in the Negro leagues as the best of his time at his position. Despite their cornmom experiences the two men handled their lives very differently, with one overcoming great adversity to become not only a successful athlete but a folk hero popularly associated with courage and wisdom, while the other died prematurely amid bitterness and sorrow.

Satchel Paige was the older of the two men. By the time Josh Gibson was a rookie, Paige had already established a storied career in the Negro leagues and as a member of barnstorming ball clubs that toured the United States. Paige was a pitcher whose fastball was thrown with frightening velocity: "Once when Satch threw to first, the batter swung, and the umpire called a strike. Another time the batter protested a called strike: 'That last one sounded a little low, didn't it, ump?' Hitters agreed that the ball actually did have a buzz or hum to it." How the righthander managed to throw as hard as he did was something of a mystery. "If I stood sideways, you couldn't see me," he said of himself, and his throwing arm looked to be more bone than meat.

But his arms were long, and he developed a very high leg kick that enabled him to whip his arm forward with great leverage. The high leg kick also provided deception since it momentarily hid the movement of his arm, and he fired the ball from every arm angle from straight overhand down to an underhanded submarine motion; when Paige released the ball the batter had no idea where it was coming from, only that it would be thrown very hard. Panicky swings, such as the one a batter made when Paige was merely throwing to first base, were common against Paige.

Most of the players Holway interviewed for his book agree that Paige was at first only a fastball pitcher and that he was weak in the finer points of the game. For instance, he was a poor fielder so opposing batters would bunt for base hits against him, forcing him off the mound to chase the ball and tire him out.

Paige displayed other talents during the first decade of his professional career. He was adept with aphorisms, colorful sayings that made good quotable copy for newspapers and magazines, and he had a good sense for business. Paige spent money freely but he knew how to cut business deals. At a time when Negro leaguers on average earned less than white minor leaguers he earned incomes in the neighborhood of forty thousand dollars per year; this was a small fortune in the 1920s and was very remarkable during the Great Depression years of the 1930s when a four thousand dollar per year was considered a good income. Paige bought his mother a new house, himself new cars and fancy clothes, and he seems to have been generous with his money without being frivolous. On the other hand, this relentless pursuit of money almost cost him his career.

Due to gross overwork later in the 1930s, Paige's pitching arm "died," (it became weak in baseball parlance). He reportedly could not lift it above his shoulder, and he worked his way through games relying on cunning because he could not throw hard. His career and his earning power seemed to disappear within a few months.

Then he had a lucky break when J. L. Wilkinson, one of the few white owners of a Negro league baseball Satchell Paige with the team, the Kansas Miami Marlins City Monarchs, and a true visionary who initiated night games, gave him a job with one of the barnstorming ball clubs he owned. He also supplied Paige with a masseuse who worked on his arm and put Paige through a routine of rehabilitation. According to Paige his arm suddenly came back to life. Working out one day the arm seemed strong again, so he threw a fastball that zipped. He learned to throw a curveball and in his thirties became the complete pitcher that most fans would come to know.

Holway remarks that "until some hefty research is done, some hefty skepticism is in order" about the accomplishments of Paige and Gibson, but he does a good job of supplying documentation for the events he describes. For Paige, the documentation becomes easier to find after he was featured in national magazines such as Look. He was a striking figure, hands gnarled, face weathered, and tall and thin in loose baseball uniforms—ideal for cover illustrations. He had long become a sage for younger ballplayers, giving them advice such as "Don't be a know-it-all, take it easy with the girls, and lay off the liquor." His clever aphorisms also made for colorful interviews, and he attracted readers with remarks such as "Never let your head hang down. Never give up and sit down and grieve. Find another way. And don't pray when it rains if you don't pray when the sun shines."

This saying could stand for his own life and how he lived it.

When he played for the Pacific Coast League club the San Francisco Seals, Joe DiMaggio managed to hit an infield single off Paige during an exhibition game. He reportedly said, "I just got a hit off Satchel Paige. I know I can make the Yankees now." Even with the enormous respect he still commanded Paige was wondering, "Maybe I'm over the hill." His "business acumen was as sharp as ever," but his longtime ambition to be the first African-American to officially play in the major leagues seemed to be unrealizable; he was becoming too old. Perhaps this is why he began to lie about his age.

When Jackie Robinson, a college graduate and a World War II serviceman was chosen to be the first black to play in the major leagues since the turn of the century, Paige was resentful. The situation was not helped by Robinson's dislike of Paige: "Robinson considered Paige a minstrel show comedian, who was making it difficult for serious blacks to win respect on their talent."

When Paige finally got his chance to pitch in the American League he used all of his showmanship to attract fans and to publicize himself. When called in from the bullpen to pitch in relief he would do a slow, tired-looking shuffle that had the effect of driving up an audience's tension—he was the legendary hero, old and worn, coming in for one more

great effort on behalf of his team. It is no wonder that this bothered Robinson and other African-American ballplayers, but it also helped to build the Satchel Paige legend. He finally had the chance when in his forties to pitch in the "white" leagues, and he took advantage of the opportunity; not only did he become a permanent folk hero, but he pitched very well, earning the Rookie of the Year award. He refused to accept the award saying, "Twenty-two years is a long time to be a rookie."

Paige "was a strange person, made his own rules," said shortstop Marty Marion. The same man who played up his image as a sage from the rural South also had stood up to racial bigotry all of his career, and he was proud of his decades in the Negro leagues. Thus, so far as he was concerned, he had already had his rookie season decades before African-Americans were allowed to play in the major leagues. Interestingly, "He [Paige] said he ran into surprisingly little race prejudice" during his years in the major leagues, not experiencing the abuse that Jackie Robinson endured.

He pitched well into his fifties, confiding that he was able to do so because major leaguers never bunted against him. Near the end of his life, lugging oxygen tanks around to help him breathe, he remained a showman and the center of attention wherever he went. He asserted that "if I had to do it all over again, I would. I had more fun and seen more places with less money than if I was Rockefeller."

Paige's life of endurance and triumph contrasts with that of Josh Gibson. Universally described as an overgrown boy, Gibson was full of fun and play. He was big and muscular with quick hands, and from the first he was a great hitter, but his fielding was awkward; he was a catcher who dropped too many balls. He was well coached by veteran players and soon developed a fearsome throwing arm, making him a threat to throw out any base stealer. Even so, it was his hitting that earned him the nickname "the black Babe Ruth." Holway offers detailed accounts of Gibson's exploits, including carefully documenting his longest home runs.

"Beneath his boyish demeanor, Josh was tough," says Holway. "It was awful the way the white people talked about us. We'd ignore their insults and just beat the pants off them," says fellow Negro leaguer Chet Brewer.

Nonetheless, the outwardly boyish Gibson began to fray away his insides, and Holway attempts to explain why.

Perhaps the discontent began with remarks like Dizzy Dean's: "Josh, I wish you and Satchel played with me 'n Paul on the Cardinals. Hell, we'd win the pennant by July 4th and go fishin' the rest of the season." Another possibility is offered by a rumor that his wife had mishandled their money while he had been away; certainly, money became a big issue with him— in Holway's account he seems to have become obsessed with earning money, and no amount was ever enough. Still another possibility is illness. He reportedly was hospitalized for a brain tumor, but the tumor was not removed. Whatever the reason, says player Ted Page: He changed from the Josh I knew: a kid, just an overgrown kid who did nothing but play ball and eat ice cream or go to the movies. Strictly play, this was Josh. Well, that changed, all that.

He started to drink. I wasn't close enough to him to have found out why, but it seems to me that his wife had misused some money, like when you're playing down in the tropics and you send some money home. If this is true, I don't know. But I would like to say this: Something caused the man to change from what he was —a congenial, big, old, young boy —to a man who was kind of bitter with somebody, or mad with somebody, he wasn't really sure who.

Gibson's behavior eventually become strange. Paige had always been a bit eccentric but seemed by and large in control of himself. Gibson, though, seemed to loose control. Players reported seeing the effects of drug and alcohol abuse in his behavior; there were quick visits to bathrooms followed by periods in which Gibson's mind seemed to be in a haze. This may have led to a nervous breakdown.

When he learned that Jackie Robinson was to be the first official black in the major leagues instead of him, even though he had tried out for major league clubs, he seemed to simultaneously burn with great anger and stop taking care of himself. He became so fat that he could not sit down into a full catcher's crouch, having instead to bend forward slightly. He savaged opposition pitching despite his girth, having one of the best seasons any hitter has ever had. Holway documents his tremendous feats of hitting power along with a nearly .400 batting average. He abruptly died during the off season; "the death is still a mystery," asserts Holway. Perhaps his brain tumor killed him. Perhaps drugs killed him. Many of his fellow players had their own theory about Gibson's death, summed up by Satchel Paige: "I say he died of a broken heart."

Topics for Discussion

1. What are some of the funniest passages in Josh and Satch?

2. Why would Negro league ballplayers be concerned about their image, with some always going out in public dressed in a suit and a tie?

3. Holway says that Jackie Robinson disliked Paige. What about Paige did Robinson object to? Were those good reasons for disliking Paige?

4. Why did Paige earn more money than Gibson?

5. The lives of Paige and Gibson have two very different endings. What in their personalities may have dictated the different directions their lives took?

6. Why was it personally important to Paige to pitch in the major leagues when he was already more famous and had earned more money than most major leaguers?

7. Holway offers more than one possibility for what killed Gibson.

What are the possibilities? Which is the most likely reason for his death?

Could there be more than one reason?

8. What were the hardest parts about playing in the Negro leagues?

Why would players endure such hardships rather than quitting and finding another job?

9. What were the enjoyable aspects of playing in the Negro leagues?

10. What made Paige a "strange person"?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Josh and Satch is filled with references to players and others involved in the Negro leagues besides Gibson and Paige. Choose one of them and research his or her life and then write a short biography of that person. You may wish to imitate Holway's style which emphasizes quotations from firsthand observers.

2. One player complains about having trouble finding service stations that would let African-Americans use their bathrooms. How widespread was this problem in those days? Was it exclusively a Southern problem, or were African-Americans refused service because of their race in other regions of the United States?

3. Why would there be marked differences between the behaviors of Northern and Southern African-Americans in the 1920s? What social forces were at work in shaping their behavior? Why would the Northerners and Southerners be antagonistic to each other?

4. Many African-American baseball players preferred to play in Latin American leagues. What was the appeal of Latin American baseball? How were the players from the United States treated in Latin American countries?

5. Major league players and Negro league players often played each other in exhibition games and during offseason barnstorming tours. Write an account of these meetings between the players and of their effect on the sport of baseball.

6. What reasons did the executives of major league teams give for not hiring the likes of Paige and Gibson?

Why would a team in contention for a pennant not want to hire a pitcher who could win them twenty games and a slugger who could hit any pitch 500 feet?

7. Paige and Gibson as well as other Negro leaguers avoided public demonstrations for admitting AfricanAmericans into the major leagues.

What about the demonstrations bothered them? Why did they avoid such demonstrations?

8. In Paige's and Gibson's day there were major league ballplayers such as Ty Cobb who wanted nothing to do with Negro players. Who were some of these players? What were their reasons for not wanting to play against African-Americans?

9. Some major league managers and players wanted to include AfricanAmericans in the major leagues. Holway cites Dizzy Dean often as an outspoken supporter for admitting African-Americans to the major leagues.

Who were some of the others who wanted to include African American players? What did they try to do to open the major leagues to AfricanAmericans?

10. Was Satchel Paige the best pitcher of all? What other pitchers may have been better? What do people who saw them pitch say about who was the best? What criteria would you use to determine who was the best pitcher?

11. Some historians think that Gibson was killed by drug abuse. How prevalent were illicit drugs in baseball in the 1940s? Did they harm any other players?

For Further Reference

Berger, Morey. Review. Library Journal 116, 3 (February 15, 1991): 200. Recommends Josh and Satch as very good reading.

"Holway, John." In Contemporary Authors. Ed. Cynthia R. Fadool. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976. A brief summary of Holway's life and career.

"Negro Leagues Register." In The Baseball Encyclopedia. Rick Wolff, et al., ed. New York: Macmillan, ninth edition, 1993, pp. 2609-2680. Although far from a complete listing of all Negro leaguers, this has the most authoritative statistics for many of the stars of the Negro leagues.

Related Titles

Holway began his research of Negro league baseball by interviewing those who had been involved in the various Negro leagues. These interviews continued for many years before resulting in Voices from the Great Blackball Leagues (1975), a collection of interviews.

Young readers as well as adults are likely to enjoy the down-to-earth stories told by players and others associated with the leagues. Oscar Charleston (1988; see separate entry, Vol 9) and Blackball Stars (1988) are Holway's other major books (in addition to Josh and Satch) on the Negro Leagues. Blackball Stars is a rewritten compilation of numerous articles Holway had published about Negro leaguers. It has short biographies of many of the players, owners, and executives involved in the creation of the leagues as well as those involved in the playing of league games. Blackball Stars is somewhat earthier than Josh and Satch, featuring some off-color stories of ballplayers' romantic adventures. It is an excellent book and is suitable reading for teenagers.

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