

# **50 years ago, Major League Baseball stumbled before inducting Satchel Paige into the Hall of Fame**

*Even as it acknowledged one of the best pitchers ever, Cooperstown first tried out a version of 'separate but equal'*

**WILLIAM WEINBAUM**

Induction into the Hall of Fame should have been a lead-pipe cinch for a man who was quite possibly the best pitcher and entertainer in baseball history. But the honor accorded Satchel Paige exactly 50 years ago was part of a hard-fought struggle for recognition and one step in baseball's reckoning with its racial history that is anything but complete even now.

Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play Major League Baseball in the 20th century, became the first Black man enshrined in the Hall in 1962, followed by his Brooklyn Dodgers teammate Roy Campanella in 1969. But Paige was the first player inducted for his achievements while being barred from participating in the major leagues.

His daughter, Pamela Paige O'Neal, said she has vivid memories of an exuberant family celebration when Paige returned home to Kansas City, Missouri, after the Aug. 9, 1971, induction ceremony.

"We were shamelessly full of joy about it," said O'Neal, the oldest of Paige's six living children. "We slapped his hand and he said, 'How you like me now?' That was his favorite statement of accomplishment."



The speed and control of Satchel Paige's pitches, his showmanship and longevity were unrivaled.

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL  
OF FAME AND MUSEUM

The jubilation belied a needlessly painful drama that permeated the months leading up to the historic event. An early '71 MLB press release touted Paige as an "ageless patriarch of the pitching mound" who dominated the Negro Leagues as Babe Ruth did the majors. Nevertheless, the Hall planned to place his plaque in a different wing from those for Ruth and other white immortals. The decision to alter course and give Paige equal honors didn't come until a month before the festivities.

In the first 35 years after Paige's induction, the total in the Hall from the Negro Leagues rose to 35, with 17 enshrined in

2006 alone. But there have been none since. A Hall spokesman said Negro Leaguers will be eligible for election in December and then not again until 2031, as the Early Baseball Committee only meets every 10 years.

The limited number of names the committee will consider at the end of the year aren't solely representatives of the Negro Leagues. The spokesman said the committee's ballot, comprising players, managers, umpires and executives/pioneers, "will consist of 10 candidates who made their greatest impacts prior to 1950 ... those candidates can come from MLB or the Negro Leagues."

After the disintegration of the Negro Leagues began in the late 1940s, some sportswriters and advocates among the public started calling for the legends of Black baseball to be inducted into the Hall. Many said Paige deserved to be first.

The speed and control of Paige's pitches, his showmanship and longevity were unrivaled. But despite his stature as the biggest star of the late 1920s, '30s and '40s in the Negro Leagues and in countless coast-to-coast and international exhibitions – including with top white players – the efforts to get him into the Hall didn't succeed until a man widely regarded as the game's top hitter spoke out.

Ted Williams uttered a single sentence in his own induction speech in 1966 that accelerated the consideration and ultimately the enshrinement of Paige and other Negro Leagues greats. “I hope that someday, the names of Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson in some way can be added as a symbol of the great Negro players that are not here only because they were not given a chance,” Williams told the crowd that day.



Satchel Paige during his induction speech at the Baseball Hall of Fame on Aug. 9, 1971.

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

“Probably as important a thing as I ever said,” Williams told me in 1999 for an ESPN *Outside the Lines* special. “I believed what I was saying and thought it was a great injustice.”

Gibson, a peerless catcher and slugger, never had the opportunity to play in the major leagues. Paige didn't receive a shot until the Cleveland Indians signed him at age 42 in 1948 – the year after Robinson broke the color barrier. The 6-foot-3 right-hander, the oldest “rookie” ever, pitched in six big league seasons, including a game in 1965 when he threw three scoreless innings for the Kansas City Athletics at age 59, as MLB's oldest player ever.

At the time, the Hall's rule for selection required all players to appear in at least 10 seasons in the majors. It “was saying to the Negro Leaguers, ‘We're no longer going to exclude you because you're Black, we're now going to exclude you because you're not qualified – you're not qualified because we excluded you before,’ ” said baseball historian Bill James.

“The people that founded the Baseball Hall of Fame lived in a racist society and were blind to the dimensions of that racism,” James said in our 1999 interview. “They didn't put Negro Leaguers in, simply because it never occurred to them.”

O'Neal said Paige didn't express to his children disdain for MLB or the Hall or unhappiness about being excluded. “My dad was not one to lament about anything,” she said. “He would not spend a lot of time or a lot of verbiage discussing what happened in the past, he was all about moving forward and making things better.”

Williams, who died in 2002, said that as a teenager in San Diego he got to see Paige play and years later faced him in the majors and struck out on a hesitation pitch that fooled him. Baseball-Reference's Stathead tool shows Williams had two hits – both singles – in nine at-bats, plus two walks (one intentional) against Paige, who was 12 years his senior. The lone strikeout came in 1951, in their final matchup, when Paige was with the St. Louis Browns.



Satchel Paige was the first baseball player inducted for his achievements while being barred from participating in the major leagues.

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

That encounter so enraged the Boston Red Sox star that he slammed his bat against a dugout railing, cracking its handle in two places. Someone saved the Williams broken bat and it is preserved as an artifact in the Hall of Fame.

Five years after the succinct '66 advocacy by Williams, MLB commissioner Bowie Kuhn announced that a special committee on the Negro Leagues had selected Paige as its first yearly honoree, but for a Hall exhibit separate from the gallery of major leaguers. At the Feb. 4, 1971, news conference, Kuhn acknowledged that “technically, you’d have to say he’s not in the Hall of Fame.”

Larry Lester, a leading historian of the Negro Leagues, said those actions demonstrated “an apartheid baseball mindset [and] separate is never equal.”

Paige’s Kansas City Monarchs teammate Buck O’Neil, who died in 2006, remembered in our interview seven years earlier that Paige was publicly grateful and conciliatory, but privately and proudly resistant. “No, he wasn’t going for that, he’d rather not be in the



Hall of Fame,” recounted O’Neil, adding that Paige said, “ ‘I want to be in the Hall of Fame, but I won’t go in the back door.’ ”

Criticism of the commissioner, MLB and the Hall of Fame was swift and unsparing, including from Robinson, who suggested that Paige boycott the ceremony.

John Thorn, MLB’s “official historian” since 2011, told *The Undefeated*, “I think the outrage and umbrage was in the majority, a distinct majority, and Kuhn had no choice but to back down.” In Kuhn’s 1987 memoir, *Hardball*, he indicated he had a plan and that the outcry and charges of Jim Crow separatism were a predictable development that he figured would persuade the Hall’s directors to give full-fledged membership to Paige and the Negro Leagues’ subsequent electees.

On July 7, 1971 – Paige’s 65th birthday – he received notification that he would become a true member of the Hall the following month, along with seven inductees from the majors. During a seven-minute speech on Aug. 9 of that year in front of the Hall’s library, Paige was repeatedly interrupted by ovations and said, “I am the proudest man in the place.”

Said Williams in ’99, “He was great and everybody liked him. Jesus, you might as well take the whole Hall of Fame out if he is not in it – greatest draw, greatest pitcher.”



Two of Satchel Paige’s daughters, Linda (left) and Pamela (right), stand next to a newly unveiled statue of their father in Cooperstown, New York, in 2006.

LARRY LESTER

Recalling her reaction, O'Neal said, "Honestly, it was like a sigh of relief for me, because finally he had been properly acknowledged for his abilities and for his career."

In December 2020, MLB commissioner Rob Manfred took the unexpected and mostly lauded step of designating the 1920-1948 Negro Leagues, its players and records as officially "major league." But in a move that evoked to some the ham-handed handling of Paige in '71, MLB's press release said it was "elevating" the Negro Leagues.

Lester, cited in the release for his decades of pursuing, analyzing and tabulating reams of elusive and fragmented statistics of the Negro Leagues, said "elevate" was "very disingenuous, it was not appropriate," adding, "... we don't need to be elevated, we were already there, we proved it on the ballfield."

Nonetheless, Lester said he applauds MLB for its recognition of the Negro Leagues. He said he hopes MLB officials "will expand their mindset and reach out to some of the people in the Black community and learn how words have power and make the correct decision in their next press announcement."

Thorn, long a proponent of recognition and homage for the Negro Leagues, bristled at criticism of MLB as tone-deaf – or worse. "The one word does not detract from the mission, it does not detract from the action," said Thorn, who hailed the 2020 announcement as "a signal accomplishment of the commissioner and his tenure."

O'Neal said of the "major league" designation of her father and his fellow Negro Leaguers: "Their talents were unimaginable, and they worked and they never complained. Their abilities to me were not valued, but now they are, and so I am happy about that for the children, the grandchildren or the relatives of any of those players who have lived long enough – I'm 73 – to see this come to fruition."

Both Paige's '71 induction and the recent reclassification of the Negro Leagues, said Thorn, show "unquestionably an aspect of contrition. We messed up. We can't change the past, but what can we do now. That in the end is the only interesting question for the future."

Lester and Thorn, longtime friends, both expressed hope that MLB's self-described "long overdue recognition" will spark further scholarship on the Negro Leagues, advances in collecting and archiving data, and increased attention and acclaim for the players.

Lester noted the importance of seamlessly incorporating stats – such as Paige's strikeout-per-inning rate that he said is comparable to Nolan Ryan's – to illuminate achievements for broader audiences. Lester said stats validate "probably another couple of dozen ballplayers" from the Negro Leagues to follow in Paige's footsteps as inductees.

Paige died in 1982 at age 75 and his daughter says the fulfillment he experienced in Cooperstown, New York, made a profound difference for him.

“I think that his induction into the Hall of Fame added an extra 10 years to his life,” she said. “It was like you had walked around holding your breath for 50 or 60 years and then you could exhale, so I believe that was the pièce de résistance. That’s what kept him moving.

“And, boy, you talk about talking trash. He was the trash-talkingest person after he got in the Hall of Fame.”

O’Neal said she enjoyed being a foil for her father, so she was the target of much of the trash-talking. In 2006, she traveled to Cooperstown for the unveiling of a bronze statue of Paige in his distinctive pitching motion, a few steps from where he delivered his induction speech, by the entrance to the Hall’s library. It is a fitting place to honor a man O’Neal said always emphasized education and helped steer her toward a career as a teacher.

O’Neal and Lester stressed the importance of understanding that Paige, a native of Mobile, Alabama, did not just play baseball. He fought and surmounted indignities with flair and fortitude, battled for equality and pioneered the use of leverage to obtain the most money from obstinate promoters and executives.

Paige concisely conveyed those lessons to O’Neal when, as a child, she complained that something was “too hard” or “too tough.”

“Tough people survive tough times,” he said. “Get it going.”

*William (Willie) Weinbaum is an ESPN broadcast and digital journalist whose career highlights include co-producing the groundbreaking 1997 Outside the Lines special “Breaking the Line: Jackie Robinson’s legacy.” Robinson tops his list of figures from sports history he wishes he could have met for a meal, interviewed or (preferably) both.*