

The Man with the Golden Arm

Recruitment for college athletics in the late 1920s bore little resemblance to the way it is practiced today. Formal time lines and guidelines had yet to be established, and there was no framework for official campus visits by prospective students. Colleges and universities deployed scouts to find a few bright kids who could play sports, but rarely did more than one school compete for a single recruit.

For 18-year-old Claude Passeau — a tall, slim boy from a poor family in Waynesboro who longed to play major league baseball — the situation was different. Both Millsaps and Louisiana State University were making efforts to land the athletically gifted young man who not only could out-run, out-throw, out-hit and outscore his peers, but who also had an impeccable academic record.

As far as Passeau was concerned, the schools were equal. Both had an athletic program that offered him a future, and when LSU offered him a steady job as part of a recruitment package, he packed his bags for Baton Rouge.

But at the last minute, Heber Ladner, a Millsaps alumnus and representative (who in 1948 would become Mississippi's secretary of state) made a final attempt to recruit Passeau. And in an action that would be considered illegal today, Ladner offered him a \$20 bill, telling him to use half of the money for a train ticket to Jackson. If Passeau did not like Millsaps, Ladner said, he could take the rest of the money and go to LSU. Passeau grabbed the money, picked up his suitcase, and never looked back.

It was a choice that would take him from those humble Mississippi beginnings to a legendary 13-year career in major league baseball that included a 1941 All-Star face-off against the “Splendid Splinter” Ted Williams and a 1945 World Series one-hitter.

Passeau, who at 93 is the oldest living member of The Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame, liked Millsaps from the moment he stepped on campus. And while he went to classes and worked serving meals in the school cafeteria, Passeau earned an astounding 12 athletic letters as a standout mem-

ber of the Millsaps baseball, basketball, football, and track teams during the 1928-32 seasons.

On campus, Passeau was known as the cafeteria boy and the four-sport all-star. But in the baseball world, he was noticed for his 95-mph fastball. “I could throw my fastball so good that some players and coaches thought I cheated, but I could not have thrown a spitball if I had to,” recalls Passeau, who graduated in 1932 and is a member of the Millsaps Sports Hall of Fame. “My fastball just moved, especially in to left-handed hitters. I threw different speeds and sunk the ball.” That pitch is known today as a slider — and nobody in baseball had seen such a thing until Passeau took the mound as a major league player in the mid-1930s.

Millsaps alumnus Claude Passeau is a major league legend of the mound

by Jeff Mitchell



At six-foot-three and 200 pounds in college, Passeau was feared as a pitcher, and professional scouts paid close attention. But there was a catch. Collegiate baseball had been his first opportunity to play the sport in an organized manner, and he was encouraged to acquire more experience before trying for the major leagues.

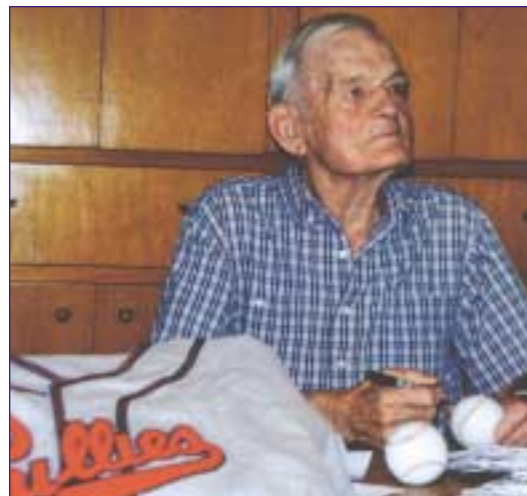
So Passeau stayed at Millsaps. But he also found a crafty way of entering the professional circuit, playing summer ball under an assortment of assumed names. “I played under 12 different names in places like Montreal, Hutchinson (Kansas), and Mexico,” says Passeau. “I would play two or three weeks in one place under one name, then go over yonder 500 miles looking for somebody who needed a pitcher. I

had to travel a lot, but I got paid, which was the main thing in a young ballplayer's mind. Playing professional ball while in college was a blessing. I gained invaluable experience while pitching professionally.”

In what was perhaps his most famous incarnation, Passeau crossed the border to Mexico and changed his name to John McGrew. “And that John McGrew was one of the best pitchers I have ever seen,” he says, chuckling.

Nobody ever found out.

In 1935, three years after graduation, Passeau got his first big break as a pitcher in the Detroit Tigers farm system in Des Moines. He won 20 games that year and was headed for stardom. “I was a grade-school kid in the '30s when I



Passeau was throwing the pitch known today as the slider. Nobody in baseball had seen that pitch until Passeau stepped on the mound.

McDowell. "He was a big-game type of player. He was a competitor to the end."

Yeglin agrees. "Passeau was fierce," he says. "I will never forget listening to the radio broadcast of the 1945 World Series when Passeau faced Detroit." Yeglin was in Japan, in the countryside 50 miles northwest of Tokyo during the first months of occupation by his outfit, listening to a U.S. Army Command radio carried in the back seat of his Jeep. Recalls Yeglin: "We sat outside there in the Jeep listening in stunned and excited silence as Passeau retired the Tigers one by one."

Passeau credits his endurance to staying healthy and maintaining a positive outlook. His advice to young players today? "Prepare the body, prepare the mind, and give it 100 percent," he says.

saw Passeau pitch for the Des Moines Demons," says Harold Yeglin, a veteran sportswriter formerly of the *Des Moines Register*. Larger than life and a genuine American good ol' boy, "Passeau was my hero," says Yeglin. "He was simply fascinating."

Nevertheless, the Detroit organization released Passeau at the end of the 1935 season. The Pittsburgh Pirates quickly signed him, and Passeau made one big-league start before the end of the 1935 campaign. During the off-season that year, the Pirates traded Passeau to Philadelphia, where he pitched for three seasons for the hapless Phillies. A competitive right-hander, Passeau longed to be part of a winning team.

After three seasons with the Philadelphia club, he was traded to the Cubs in mid-1939, the year in which he led the National League with 137 strikeouts. He was 20-13 for Chicago in 1940 with a 2.50 ERA, and in 1942 he held a 19-14 record with a 2.68 ERA. In 1945, Passeau posted a 17-9 mark in tandem with a 2.46 ERA as he led the Cubs to the World Series. Over the span of his career, Passeau pitched in 444 games and started in 331. Of those started, he threw 188 complete games, a feat unheard of today. Passeau won 162 games and lost 150, with a 3.32 ERA.

Passeau's best major league performance came during game three of the 1945 World Series. He faced 28 batters, just one over the minimum, allowed only one hit, and propelled his team to a 3-0 victory over the Detroit Tigers. Not until Don Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series had a pitcher ever turned out a performance of that magnitude on such a grand stage. "I really enjoyed that game," says Passeau. "Not only because it was the World Series, but also because the Tigers said that I would never make it to the big leagues when they released me in 1935."

Passeau's performance on the mound remains a legendary chapter in the lexicon of baseball. According to Jimmie McDowell, the longtime sportswriter and Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame member, Passeau has always been a winner. "Passeau never disappointed," says

Passeau versus Ted Williams in the 1941 All-Star Game

Days before the 2002 All-Star Game, one of baseball's brightest stars faded at the age of 83. Ted Williams, known as the "Splendid Splinter," was a man of special vision and extraordinary talent, considered by many baseball historians as the best hitter of all time. To many, Williams' most famous baseball feat was the .406 batting average that he posted in a heralded 1941 campaign. However, "Teddy Ballgame" considered his happiest baseball moment a game-winning home run off the right-handed flamethrower Claude Passeau in the 1941 All-Star Game.

With the National Leaguers leading 5-2 in the bottom of the ninth inning, Passeau retired the first American Leaguer on an infield pop-up, but two singles and a walk later the bases were loaded. That brought to the plate the great Joe DiMaggio, who was in the midst of his celebrated 56-game hitting streak and MVP season.

DiMaggio's sharp grounder to the shortstop should have ended the game. Eddie Miller tossed the ball to second baseman Billy Herman for the second out, but Herman's wide relay to first spoiled the double play. The error also enabled the American Leaguers' fourth scoring run and put runners at the corners.

Next up was Williams, who had ripped an RBI double earlier in the game and who was leading the baseball world with a .405 batting average. Despite having been struck out by Passeau in his previous at-bat, Williams blasted a towering shot off the right field roof amid a thunderous roar from the partisan crowd. The American League had turned near defeat into a rousing 7-5 celebration.

"Well, it was the kind of thing a kid dreams about and imagines himself doing when he's playing those little playground games," Williams said. "Passeau was tough. He worked the count to 2 and 1, then he came in with his trademark sliding fastball around my belt, and I swung. It was no cut-down protection swing; it was an all-out home run swing. I've never been so happy, and I've never seen so many happy guys. It was a wonderful, wonderful day for me."

— Jeff Mitchell



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Claude Passeau
Born: April 9, 1909
Hometown: Waynesboro, Mississippi

College Career

- **Millsaps (1928-32)**
- Baseball
- Basketball
- Football
- Track

Professional Career

- **Pittsburgh Pirates (1935)**
- **Philadelphia Phillies (1936-39)**
- **Chicago Cubs (1939-47)**
- **Cubs minor league manager (1948-49)**

Highlights

- **Threw one-hitter in 1945 World Series**
- **MLB All-Star (1941, 1942, 1945, 1946)**
- **Inducted into Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame (1964)**

CLAUDE PASSEAU

CHICAGO CUBS - PITCHER

1940

720

CLAUDE PASSEAU

Claude William Passeau
 Height: 6'3" Weight: 198 Bats: Right Throws: Right
 Born: Apr. 9, 1909, Waynesboro, MS
 Living in Lenoir, VA

YEAR	TEAM	G	IP	CG	W	L	ERA
1935	PHI-A	1	0	0	0	0	0.00
1936	PHI-A	49	219	8	24	11	3.48
1937	PHI-A	38	260	18	24	14	3.34
1938	PHI-A	42	238	15	20	11	4.52
1939	PHI-A	6	62	4	5	2	4.22
1940	CHI-N	35	221	13	21	10	2.50
1941	CHI-N	46	281	19	25	14	3.00
1942	CHI-N	34	221	10	22	13	3.50
1943	CHI-N	36	219	14	24	14	3.36
1944	CHI-N	33	227	16	24	14	2.68
1945	CHI-N	34	227	18	23	9	2.46
1946	CHI-N	21	139	10	11	7	2.46
1947	CHI-N	18	87	7	8	6	3.13
TOTAL		444	2709	148	184	114	3.32

One of the top National League pitchers of the 1940s, the Cubs Claude Passeau hurled a 1-hitter against Detroit in the 1945 World Series, started the 1946 All-Star Game, and pitched up 27 career shutouts. Once Passeau was called into the Commissioner's office, "We suspect you're throwing a splitter," he was told. "If we catch you, you'll be arrested," he said. "Go ahead and try. I know I'm not cheating."

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