

# AARON POINTER

## THE LAST .400 HITTER

**THE SAYING GOES** that hitting a round ball with a round bat—squarely—is one of the most difficult tasks to master in all of sports. Hitting .300 in a season is considered an accomplishment. Batting .400 is regarded as magical.

La Vel Freeman came oh-so-close, hitting .395 for El Paso of the Texas League in 1987. More recently, New Orleans' Rick Short flirted with fame, as newspapers listed his .402 average on August 20, 2005, only to see Short finish the season with a .383 mark.

So, who was the last man to hit .400 in the minor leagues? None other than: Aaron Pointer.

Signed in 1961 by Houston scout Bobby Mattick off the campus of the University of San Francisco where he starred in both basketball and baseball, Pointer joined the Colt .45s organization during the teams' infancy.

After spring training in Jacksonville, Florida, the 19 year old was assigned to Class D Salisbury, North Carolina of the Western Carolina League. Mired with a sore arm from pitching at USF, the outfielder took his position at first base for the Salisbury Braves and was an immediate hit.

With Houston Farm Director Tal Smith observing the "Baby Colts" on May 12, *The Sporting News* reported on May 24, 1961, that:

*"Smith saw Jack Lane hurl a three-hitter and First Baseman Aaron Pointer enjoy a perfect night at the plate with three singles and a triple in a 7 to 3 victory over Lexington."*

The May 31 issue reported that Pointer was a "brilliant prospect" hitting .489 through Salisbury's first 15 games.

"I started out very fast, hitting over .500 the first month of the season and just continued that way through the whole season, tapering off at the end," recalled Pointer. "It really didn't register with me, since all through my amateur career I hit with those numbers, so it didn't seem like a big deal after all."

What was a big deal was the Oakland native's experience with segregation in the South.

"The thing that jumped out at me the most at that

time in 1961 was the segregation in the South," noted Pointer. "I remember the tough situations regarding the Jim Crow Laws... separate restrooms, going to towns and not being able to stay with the team in the hotel and having to live with a family. I remember those kind of things, that made my social well-being very tough."

However, Pointer would endure.

With a .420 batting average on July 14, he drove in the winning run in the league's All-Star Game. On the final day of the season, with Salisbury locked in a first-place tie with the Statesboro Owls, Pointer put his .400-season average on the line and rapped out two hits in three at-bats, helping the Braves win the pennant and give him a final average of .402.

"I would just go out and play and hope that we won the ballgame," said Pointer of his first season of pro ball. "It wasn't something that I was fixated on, as far as my batting average. It had never dawned on me what I had just accomplished, even after the season."

Pointer was named the Western Carolina League's MVP for a season that saw him lead the circuit not only batting, but also in hits (124), doubles (18), triples (14), and stolen bases (40).

He would reach the majors in 1963, but would only fashion a career .208 average in 101 big league at-bats over 40 games during parts of three seasons. His minor league days lasted until 1969, before a three-year stint in Japan closed out his professional career at the end of 1972.

While batting .400 is no easy task, it was significantly more difficult for Pointer, who overcame prejudice, as well as curveballs, to hit .402 in 1961.

■ Brad Del Barba



**AARON POINTER:** who is also the brother of the famous singing group, The Pointer Sisters, went on to a distinguished career officiating in the NFL.