

US baseball great Henry Aaron dies at age 86

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Henry “Hammerin Hank” Aaron, regarded as one of Major League Baseball’s all-time greatest players, died on January 22 in Atlanta, Georgia at the age of 86.

Aaron, an African American, entered the Major Leagues in 1954, seven years after Jackie Robinson had broken the “color barrier,” and began a career that spanned 23 seasons, from 1954 through 1976.

Aaron’s career began during the period of segregation and overt racism and continued through the height of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In 1973-74, as he approached the career home run record set by Babe Ruth in 1935, which had stood for almost 40 years, Aaron became the target of racist hate mail and death threats. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of people of all races wrote to Aaron to express their support and admiration.

Henry Aaron was born on February 5, 1934 in Mobile, Alabama, one of eight children. Growing up in the rigidly segregated South, he experienced both racism and poverty.

He would later recall times when his mother made all the children lie on the floor for fear of attacks by the Ku Klux Klan. His father was a poorly paid shipyard worker, who struggled to support the large Aaron household. His family could not afford baseball equipment, so Aaron practiced by hitting bottle caps with sticks. He would create his own bats and balls out of materials he found on the street.

With no formal coaching, Aaron grew up batting cross-handed, but nevertheless became such a fearsome hitter that, while still a teenager, he began playing for the Mobile Black Bears, a semipro team, which paid him \$10 a game. In 1951, at the age of 17, Aaron began his professional career with the Indianapolis Clowns of the Negro American League.

Leaving the South for the first time, Aaron would still experience various forms of bigotry and racism. He described an incident that happened when the Clowns were playing a game in Washington DC:

We had breakfast while we were waiting for the rain to stop, and I can still envision sitting with the Clowns in a restaurant behind Griffith Stadium and hearing them break all the plates in the kitchen after we finished eating. What a horrible sound. Even as a kid, the irony of it hit me: here we were in the capital in the land of freedom and equality, and they had to destroy the plates that had touched the forks that had been in the mouths of black men. If dogs had eaten off those plates, they’d have washed them.

In 1952, Aaron caught the attention of a scout from Major League Baseball’s Boston Braves. The Braves paid the Clowns \$10,000 for his rights, signed him, and sent him to their minor league club in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. There he was finally shown the proper way to grip a bat and went on to become the Northern League’s Rookie of the Year.

Aaron was next sent, in 1953, to Jacksonville, Florida of the South Atlantic League. He was one of only five black players in a league which played in the segregated Deep South. He was unable to eat in restaurants or stay in hotels with his white teammates, and was subjected to taunts and racial slurs, not only from fans but also from fellow ballplayers. He dealt with it all in the way he knew best, batting .362 with 22 home runs and 125 RBIs, earning the league’s Most Valuable Player award.

In 1954, Aaron began his Major League career in Milwaukee with the Braves, who had moved from Boston the year before. In 1955, Aaron was named to the All-Star team, the first of his record 21 appearances in the annual event. In 1957, Aaron won the Most Valuable Player award, leading Milwaukee to victory in the World Series. In the ensuing years, despite his stellar play, Milwaukee’s fortunes waned, and sagging attendance caused the Braves to move to Atlanta, Georgia in 1966, becoming the first Major League team to play in the Deep South.

At the time, Atlanta was becoming one of the main centers of the Civil Rights movement and the home of many of its most prominent leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. Aaron was very conscious of the importance of this movement and the role that the city of Atlanta was playing. He later recalled:

Honestly, I was scared coming to a high-profile city like Atlanta. Knowing that Dr. King was here, Andy Young and some of the other great civil rights leaders that made their home here, and I’m coming from Milwaukee where there was no activity at all... It makes you start thinking about what it is, what can you do, what role you can play. And makes you feel like you kind of shortchanged everybody really, you didn’t do your job.

Within two years of Aaron arriving in Atlanta, King would be murdered. Five years after King’s death, Aaron would find himself at the center of a racial cauldron that threatened his life as well as the lives of his family and teammates, all revolving around Aaron’s ability to hit home runs.

Aaron began the 1973 season, his twentieth, at the age of 39. He

trailed the iconic Babe Ruth's career home record of 714 by 41 home runs. By Aaron's age, most players had either retired or, if they were still able to play, their diminished skills were such that they filled only minor roles on their teams. Aaron, however, was able to continue playing at an elite level.

By the end of July, he had hit 27 home runs, becoming the only player other than Ruth to reach 700 career home runs. He was clearly in a position to eclipse Ruth, if not that season, then certainly by the next.

As Aaron chased Ruth's record in 1973, he emerged for the first time as a national sports figure. Earlier in his career, Aaron was largely overshadowed by other players, such as Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle, who had more outgoing personalities and played in bigger TV market cities. Mantle played his entire career for the New York Yankees. Mays began with the New York Giants, moving with the team to San Francisco in 1958.

In 1973, Aaron was appearing on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* and being sought out for television and newspaper interviews. This coverage, however, generated at the time an unprecedented outpouring of racial hatred. A black man breaking one of baseball's most cherished records could not be tolerated by society's most reactionary elements.

Aaron began receiving a massive number of racist letters, many threatening his life. Many fans countered this racist onslaught with letters of support and good wishes.

In total, Aaron received some 930,000 pieces of mail, more than anyone else in the country other than major political figures, according to the US Post Office. Many of the threats were investigated by the FBI, and the Braves were compelled to hire two Atlanta police officers to sit in the stands while off duty to watch over Aaron in the outfield.

As Aaron was closing in on Ruth's record, when the Braves played on the road he had to register at hotels under an alias. In Atlanta, instead of living at home he slept in an old storage room in Atlanta Stadium, where teammates brought him food. Aaron was shadowed constantly by bodyguards and forced to distance himself from teammates. At one point, FBI agents were dispatched to Fisk University in Nashville, where his daughter's life had been threatened.

By August of 1973, Charles Schulz, whose "Peanuts" comic strip had become a staple of national popular culture, turned his attention to the racist vitriol directed at Aaron by drawing cartoons that ridiculed the bigots besieging him. Babe Ruth's widow, Claire Hodgson, denounced the racism and declared that her husband would have enthusiastically cheered Aaron's attempt at the record.

Aaron ended the 1973 season with 40 home runs, for a career total of 713, one short of Ruth's record of 714. After the last game of the season Aaron said his only fear was that he might not live to see the 1974 season.

Remaining in relative seclusion during the off season, Aaron began the 1974 season in Cincinnati, where the Braves played a three-game series against the Cincinnati Reds. He tied Babe Ruth's record on April 4, 1974 in his very first at bat—on his first swing of the season—but did not hit another home run in the series.

The Braves returned to Atlanta on April 8, 1974 to play the Los Angeles Dodgers. Before a home crowd of 53,775, a Braves

attendance record, in a game that was broadcast nationally on NBC, Aaron in his second at bat hit home run number 715.

In an interview with the *New York Times* in the early 1990s, as the twentieth anniversary of his home run feat approached, Aaron said:

April 8, 1974 really led up to turning me off on baseball. It really made me see for the first time a clear picture of what this country is about. My kids had to live like they were in prison because of kidnap threats, and I had to live like a pig in a slaughter camp. I had to duck. I had to go out the back door of the ball parks. I had to have a police escort with me all the time. I was getting threatening letters every single day. All of these things have put a bad taste in my mouth, and it won't go away. They carved a piece of my heart away.

Aaron's contract expired at the end of the 1974 season and he requested a trade to the Milwaukee Brewers, where he played for two seasons before retiring in 1976. He ended his career with 755 career homers, a record that was broken by Barry Bonds (762 home runs) in 2007, although many feel Bonds' record was achieved only by using banned performance enhancing drugs. Aaron still holds the record for most career runs batted in (2,297), extra base hits (1,447) and total bases (6,856). He also ranks in the top five for career hits and runs.

In retirement, Aaron served in various executive positions with the Atlanta Braves and later with Major League Baseball. In 1982, he was voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. In 1999, at his 65th birthday celebration, Major League Baseball announced the introduction of the Hank Aaron Award, honoring each year the best overall offensive performer in the American and National Leagues. It was the first major award to be introduced in more than 30 years and had the distinction of being the first award named after a player who was still alive.

In 2002, President George W. Bush presented Aaron with the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his humanitarian efforts. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund awarded him the Thurgood Marshall Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005 and established the Hank Aaron Humanitarian in Sports Award.

Upon Aaron's death, President Joe Biden as well as all former living presidents with the exception of Donald Trump—Carter, Clinton, Bush and Obama—issued public statements recognizing Aaron's contributions and the significance of his life.

Sadly, Hank Aaron has become the ninth Hall of Fame member to die since April. Al Kaline, Tom Seaver, Lou Brock, Bob Gibson, Joe Morgan and Whitey Ford died in 2020. Tommy Lasorda and Don Sutton died this month.



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