

Maybe Hank Aaron's old locker rubbed off.

Dressing next to the sealed-off dressing space once occupied by Aaron after he came to the Braves in a 1993 trade, Fred McGriff ignited a lethargic Atlanta attack. His effort allowed the Braves to erase the Giants' 10-game advantage in the National League West Division race.

"Hank's been taking care of me since I've been here," McGriff said after San Diego sent him to Atlanta for three players who didn't make much of a dent in the majors.

By season's end, the Braves had 104 victories, San Francisco had 103, and Major League Baseball was moved to create a three-division arrangement and the first wild-card entry — allowing the second-place team with the best record to reach the playoffs.

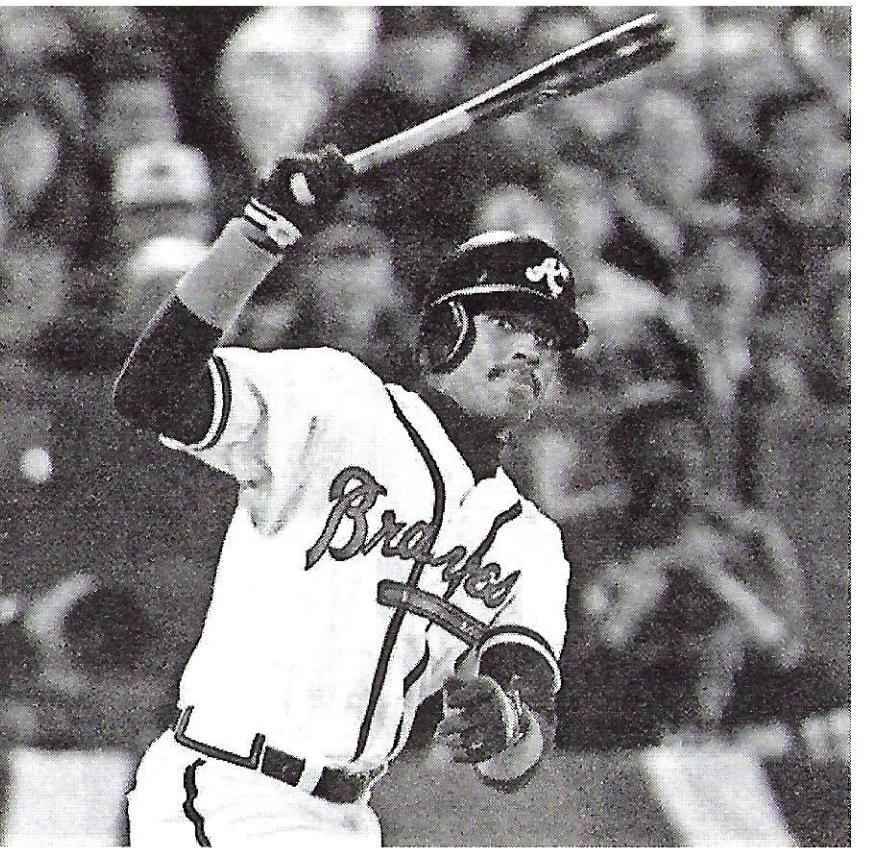
It was hardly the only time McGriff's power proved persuasive. His teams won everywhere he went, from San Diego to Chicago, but nowhere as convincingly as in Atlanta.

A Tampa, Florida, native with a lethal left-handed swing, he did something Aaron never did: He led both leagues in home runs. Also unlike Aaron, he won unanimous election to the Baseball Hall of Fame, although it took a 16-0 vote of the Contemporary Era Committee to correct an omission by the Baseball Writers' Association of America. The BBWAA's composite vote somehow ignored one of the best sluggers of his generation during his 10-year sojourn on their ballot. He never got more than 39.8%, falling far short of the mandatory 75%.

McGriff finished with 493 home runs, matching Lou Gehrig; won a World Series ring and an All-Star MVP award; and collected seven consecutive 30-homer seasons and 10 in all.

It wasn't his fault that his résumé looks like a travelogue, starting in Toronto but then moving through San Diego, Atlanta, Tampa Bay, the North Side of Chicago, Dodger Stadium and back to his native Tampa Bay again. He never played for Cincinnati, though he rooted for the Reds in his youth because the team trained at Al Lang Field in St. Petersburg, five blocks from McGriff's home. He even spent time as a ballpark vendor.

The first player to produce 30-homer seasons for five different franchises, the 6-3, 200-pound McGriff was a five-time All-Star and three-time Silver Slugger



**Fred McGriff whacked 503 home runs between the regular season and postseason and played in 50 playoff games.** ROBERT HANASHIRO/USA TODAY SPORTS

and went to postseason play five times.

His two home runs against Cleveland in the 1995 World Series helped the Braves win the first of their two World Series championships in Atlanta.

But McGriff's most memorable home run might have been the one he delivered against Hall of Fame closer Lee Smith in the ninth inning of the All-Star Game in 1994 — just before the start of a devastating 232-day player strike that almost certainly cost the slugger a niche in the 500 home run club. (Note: He also had 10 postseason homers.) He was having his best season when the strike stopped play on Aug. 12.

"When he came up, we held our breath," said Bobby Valentine, who managed against McGriff in both leagues.

In retrospect, it's hard to believe he was cut from his high school baseball team as a sophomore.

Motivated and embarrassed, he redoubled his training regimen, even biking 20 miles to get to his gym. He regained his spot on the Jefferson High

pressed with a long home run against hard-throwing future major leaguer Dwight Gooden.

Drafted by the Yankees in the ninth round of the 1981 amateur draft, McGriff never got a chance to call Yankee Stadium his home, even though he says he loves the Bronx ballpark because of its short right field dimensions.

Instead, the Yanks sent him to Toronto as part of the deal for pitcher Dale Murray and utility player Tom Dodd in 1982. Eight years later, he was involved in a much bigger trade: The Blue Jays packaged him with shortstop Tony Fernandez and moved him to the Padres for future World Series hero Joe Carter and future Hall of Famer Roberto Alomar.

When he hit 35 homers for San Diego in 1992, McGriff became the first man since the dead-ball era to lead both leagues in home runs.

Although he never won an MVP trophy, McGriff sometimes figured prominently in the voting. He collected MVP votes eight times and wound up in his

helped, but not enough with Hall of Fame electors.

All they should have done was look at the impact the first baseman made wherever he went — especially in Atlanta. Playing 68 games in 1993 for future Hall of Fame manager Bobby Cox, McGriff hit .310 with 19 home runs, 55 RBI, 59 runs scored and an OPS of 1.004. His season totals were 37 homers, 101 RBI, 111 runs scored and a .291 average.

The Braves roared down the stretch at a .750 clip (51-17) after McGriff supplanted Sid Bream as the team's first baseman.

"Just getting a player like that was an inspirational lift," said Cox, who later called the 1993 divisional title chase one of his favorite career memories. "Fred relaxed our batting order and made the difference for us in the race. He put the numbers up right away."

By sweeping the 13-game season series from the expansion Colorado Rockies, whom they faced on the final weekend, the Braves clinched the division of the final day, when the Giants lost to the Dodgers.

Atlanta faded against the Phillies in the NLCS but McGriff was a notable exception. His batting average against Philadelphia was .435.

Even though he hit 130 homers for Atlanta in 4 1/2 seasons, McGriff has decided his Hall of Fame plaque will be blank in tribute to the fans who cheered for him on six different teams and in two different leagues.

"The guy was a difference-maker," Hall of Famer Chipper Jones said for the 2023 book "The Fifty Greatest Players in Braves History."

"I think if he had been a little more outspoken, a little flashier, or whatever, you may notice the numbers a little more. He was just a professional. Very little was ever said."

In 19 seasons, McGriff hit .284, had a .509 slugging percentage and collected 2,490 hits. He also picked up the nickname "Crime Dog" after a lovable cartoon character called McGruff.

When he retired, he was tied for 10th in home runs by a left-handed hitter. He also ranked third in both career games at first base (2,239) and fielding double plays by a first baseman (1,775). His last big-league appearance came for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays on July 15, 2004.

At 59, Fred McGriff is still swinging. He's a devoted golfer who enjoys the sport year-round in the benign climate of