

# Aaron loved Cooperstown and the Hall loved him

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*[Editor's note: The following article is excerpted with permission of the author of Home Run King: the Remarkable Record of Hank Aaron, published this spring by Skyhorse.]*

It took awhile but Hank Aaron finally got the recognition he deserved from the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The "Chasing the Dream" exhibit, which dominates the museum's second floor, is all things Hank Aaron – from his humble beginnings in Mobile semipro ball to his worldwide acclaim as a record-breaking athlete and respected humanitarian.

It is also one of only two Cooperstown exhibits devoted to a single player. The other salutes Babe Ruth.

"He was always a fan favorite in Cooperstown," said former longtime Hall of Fame president Jeff Idelson. "His legacy was national, not regional."

"Henry loved being inside the Hall of Fame. He was very proud of it and loved being in that setting."

Even after he slipped on ice in front of his Atlanta home in 2014, he still came to Cooperstown five months later, leaning on wife Billye and a cane.

At the dawn of the 21st century, Aaron decided to donate all his memorabilia to the museum, Idelson said. "He believed what we did was supportive of him, the Negro Leagues, baseball in general, and the game's role in elevating society."



Hank Aaron made it to Cooperstown in the summer of 2014, just months after a fall on the ice in Atlanta. He couldn't stay away from a number of former Braves like Joe Torre, right, getting inducted. GREGORY FISHER/USA TODAY SPORTS



"I went to Atlanta with a couple of leagues and cataloged everything he did. After his mom passed away, we took his childhood home, put it on a flat-truck, and turned it into a living history museum.

"Once that happened, Tom Seaver, who worshipped Henry, said, 'If Henry doing it, I'm doing it.' Ichiro said the same thing. Four Black high schools came out to honor him and left an empty king chair on the porch as a salute to my."

Idelson, now 60, is a Boston native who watched Aaron conclude his career with the Milwaukee Brewers. "I was very fortunate I was getting the chance to see a legend," said Idelson, who went Fenway Park with his father for those times against the Red Sox.

run king," Idelson insisted. "Barry Bonds is the home run leader only because Major League Baseball allowed it to happen.

"Henry is still the all-time leader in runs batted in, extra-base hits, and total bases. Take away all his home runs and he still has more than 3,000 hits."

Idelson marveled at Aaron's personality.

"Low-key guys are hard to figure out," he said. "Henry wasn't the quintessential showman but succeeded without having to be showy. I don't think I ever met anyone as consistent as he was, especially considering his demeanor off the field. He was even-keeled and that helped him a great deal."

## 'Chasing the Dream'

Aaron's legacy would have been so

capital, Idelson said. Instead, the slugger was overlooked because he played in Atlanta before the advent of Ted Turner's TBS SuperStation and, prior to that, in a much smaller market in Milwaukee.

"What the home run chase of 1998 did was allow the lens on Henry to become even wider," Idelson said. "The way he felt about civil rights, the City of Atlanta, his care for the game, and humanity were all taken to a new level."

Aaron and his artifacts were the centerpiece of a gallery of records called "One for the Books," which became "Chasing the Dream" following a special ceremony in 2010.

"The friendship I developed with him over time is still unfathomable to me," Idelson said. "I'd be sitting around on a Saturday afternoon and he'd call to say, 'Are you watching the Falcons game?'

So are his 1957 World Series ring and waukeee Brewers in 1976.

Also included are the bats and balls from Aaron's 3000th hit, 500th and 600th home runs, and even the last one, his 755th, hit while playing for the Milwaukee Brewers in 1976.

his own opinions but was quiet about them. He really cared about people, especially his fellow Hall of Famers. "We loved our relationship with him as a museum. And his love was so profound that he donated everything. It was a great love-love relationship." For visitors to the Hall of Fame, it's impossible to bypass the sprawling Aaron exhibit, which includes such artifacts as the bat, ball, and uniform he used when breaking Ruth's home run record in Atlanta on April 8, 1974.



George W. Bush in 2002; and enlarged quotations from Mickey Mantle and Muhammad Ali.

"As far as I'm concerned," Mantle said in 1970, "Henry Aaron is the best baseball player of my era."

Ali's quote reads, "Hank Aaron is the only man I idolize more than myself."

Not all of the writers who voted for Hall of Fame candidates in the cold winter of 1982 agreed. Nine of them – nine! – decided to omit the lifetime home run leader from their 10-name ballots.

Those omissions deprived Aaron of his wish to become the first unanimous inductee and suggested that the malignant tumor of racism that had dogged the slugger throughout his career had shrunk only slightly.

With 97.8 percent of the vote, Henry Aaron ranked second at the time only to Ty Cobb's 98.2 percent in 1936, when the first Hall of Fame class was selected. The percentage was also higher than anyone – including his idol Jackie Robinson – received since the end of the color line in 1947.

"I'd belying if I said I didn't want to be unanimous," Aaron told writer Howard Bryant, author of *The Last Hero*, "but I realize nobody has been. I'm happy with the number of votes I received."

With 406 of 415 ballots cast, the quiet man from Mobile not only finished ahead of Willie Mays, Mickey Mantle and Duke Snider but also ahead of Babe Ruth, the legend whose shadow seemed to follow Aaron everywhere.

Another shadow Aaron had sought to escape was cast by the 6-foot-5-inch Commissioner of Baseball, Bowie Kuhn.

There was no congratulatory telegram after his 700th home run, no personal appearance on the night of his 715th, but plenty of interference in 1974 after the team announced it wanted Aaron to hit the historic home run at home – and not in the Braves' opening three-game series in Cincinnati.

Now it was eight years later and tempers had cooled, though maybe not memories. After touring the Hall of Fame with his family on Friday, July 30, Aaron had breakfast with Kuhn Saturday, discussed their differences, and settled matters on the Otesaga Hotel's tennis court. The younger, more athletic Aaron won.



**Hank Aaron bats in 1970, one of 20 seasons in which he hit 20 or more home runs. He hit 40 or more homers eight times. MALCOLM EMMONS/USA TODAY SPORTS**



bly be. I grew up in a home where there was little in the way of material goods. But there was an abundance of love and discipline."

Before thanking those in attendance as well as his admirers in Atlanta and Milwaukee, Aaron added, "The sheer majesty of this occasion and its significance overwhelms me. For truly I reflect on my life and particularly on my 23 years in baseball. I am reminded of a statement I once read and I quote, 'The way to fame is like the way to heaven: Through much tribulation.'"

His trials and tribulation extended beyond the bigotry he endured, first as a Black man and secondly as a Black man who dared to challenge records long held by white men. There were also perceived slights suffered at the hands of writers voting for postseason awards and even by the Hall of Fame, where Aaron's name was not always prominent and items he donated were not always displayed properly – if at all.

He also bristled when he saw the statues of Babe Ruth and Ted Williams – two white men – greeting visitors to the Hall of Fame Gallery, where plaques of the greats are posted in perpetuity.

The hurt remained even after Aaron was informed that the museum displayed only 1 percent of the items in its vast and rotating collection at any given time. But the sting lessened after he saw his first pro contract, an old locker donated by the Braves and photographs of him taken some 30 years earlier. All are part of "Chasing the Dream," a rare exhibit with permanent status.

Although there was a significant gap in Aaron's attendance at the annual midsummer inductions, he returned for the wave of former Braves who dominated the ceremonies from 2014-2018.

Even after he fell on the ice outside his Atlanta home in February of 2014, Aaron felt well enough to come to Cooperstown on a cane to witness the inductions of Bobby Cox, Tom Glavine, Greg Maddux and Joe Torre in 2014. He was back a year later for John Smoltz, then in later years for Chipper Jones and John Schuerholz.

When introduced to the vast crowd outside Clark Sports Center, where induction ceremonies were held during

years ago Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella paved the way and made it possible for Frank [Robinson] and me and for other blacks hopeful in baseball. They proved to the world that a man's ability is limited only by his lack of opportunity."

The Class of 1982 included not only Aaron and Robinson but former Baseball Commissioner Happy Chandler and New York Giants shortstop Travis Jackson.

## Relieving the hurt

The next morning, Aaron filled the nervous hours before his induction with a friendlier tennis match, against which they were finished, Aaron showered, dressed, and polished up his induction speech.

His audience that afternoon would include his parents, Estelle and Herbert Aaron, and wife Billye, as well as their five children, several siblings, and numerous baseball colleagues, including Kuhn, the two league presidents, Braves owner Ted Turner, and an All-Star