

Program Feature

Willie Mays had more flair and Mickey Mantle had more fans, but Hank Aaron had the final figures to settle any argument.

Forget Willie, Mickey, and the Duke. Hank topped them all.

In a 23-year career that began in 1954, Henry Louis Aaron hit more home runs, knocked in more runs, and collected more total bases than anyone else in baseball history. He also finished second in runs and third in hits.

Aaron's record of 755 home runs is virtually safe. A challenger would have to *average* 38 homers a year for

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orget Willie, Mickey, and the Duke. Hank topped them all.

nearly 20 seasons before wresting the crown from the home run king.

Playing out of the New York publicity spotlight might have cost Aaron a few MVP awards, but it also allowed him to make a quiet but steady ascent on the game's most hallowed record: Babe Ruth's home run total of 714.

It finally fell on April 8, 1974, in Hank Aaron's final home opener with the Atlanta Braves. He retired two years later, after completing a two-year hitch in the American League as a designated hitter for the Milwaukee Brewers.

The Milwaukee stint was a homecoming for Aaron, who was a 20-year-old minor-league infielder when Bobby Thomson's broken leg created a varsity opening in the outfield. Aaron never left the lineup again.

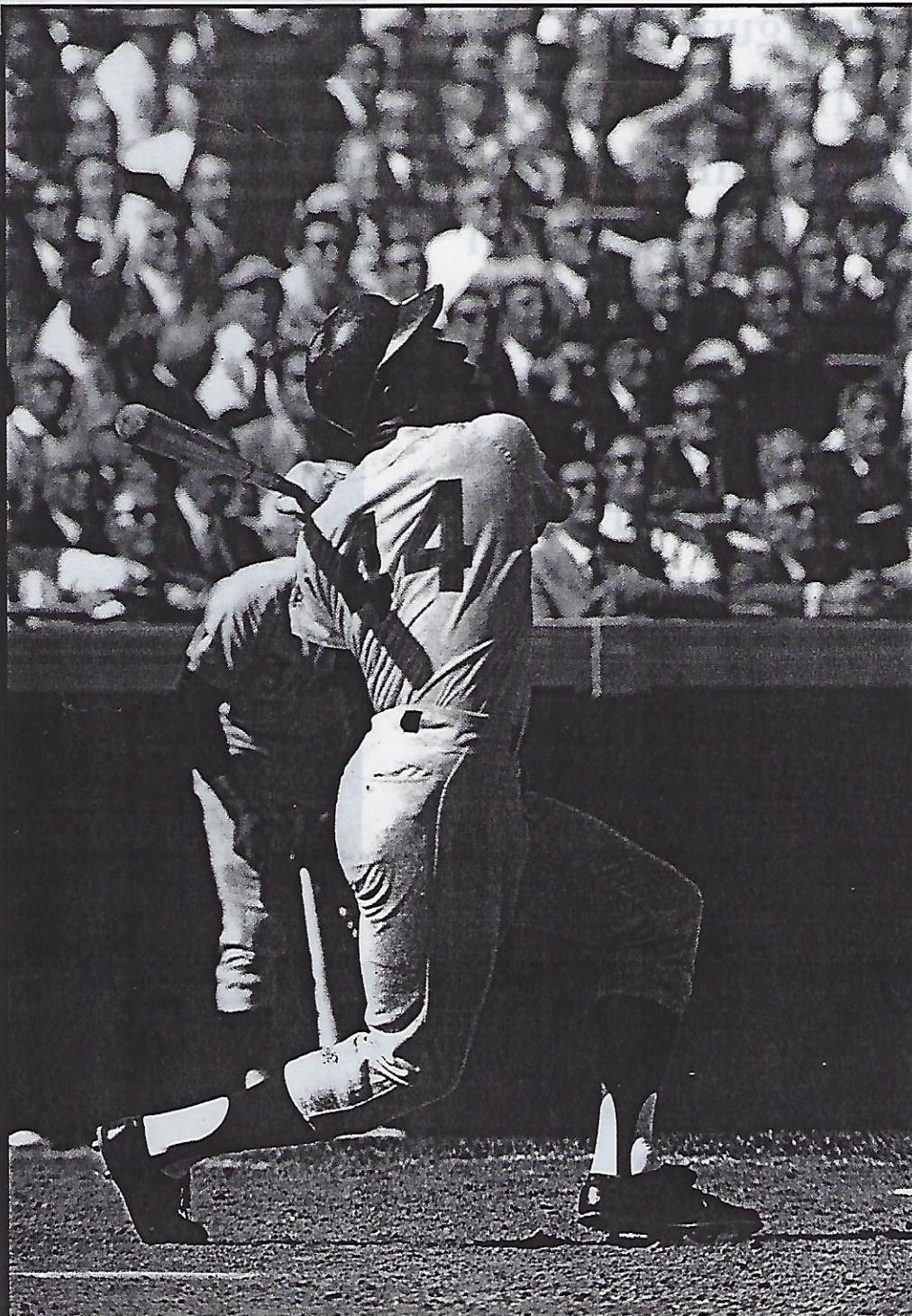
"I've always felt very comfortable with myself as a baseball player," Aaron recalled in an exclusive Legends Sports Memorabilia interview. "I felt I could do just about anything anyone else could do on the baseball field. I played the game the only way I knew how: I could catch the ball, throw it, hit it, and run."

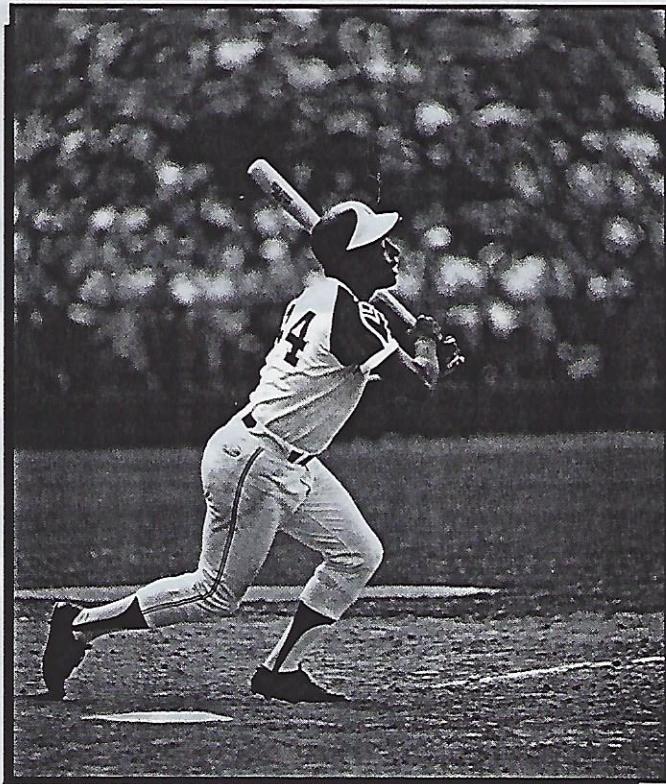
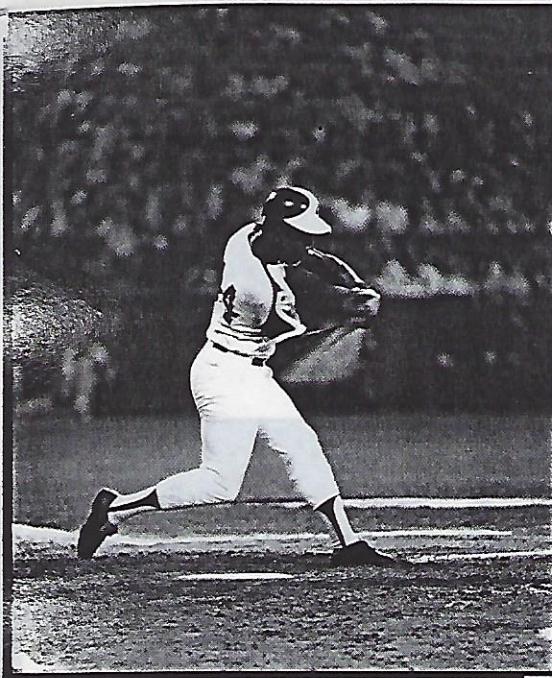
"Some guys could do it with a flair -- I didn't have any argument about that. I let the public judge who was the better ballplayer."

"I do know this: anytime people place me in the company of people like Willie Mays, Ted Williams, or Stan Musial, I'm just glad to be included."

Although modesty has always been as much an Aaron trademark as the home run, the Atlanta executive admitted that Mays earned more publicity through his flamboyance.

"That may have hurt me some -- no question about it," said Aaron, whose official title is senior vice





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uiet consistency hurt Aaron, who was not as flamboyant as other players.

president and assistant to the president of the Braves. "I do think it probably played a big part in how people looked at me as a baseball player."

Quiet consistency also hurt. While Mays and Mantle both had two 50-homer seasons, Aaron never hit more than 47 -- and didn't reach that level until he was 38.

"I think 1959 was probably my best overall year," said Aaron, who finished that year with career highs in average (.355), hits (223), and total bases (400). "I don't think I had a slump all year. I hit the ball well from start to finish."

Writers voting for Most Valuable Player gave the award to Jimi Banks, shortstop of the fifth-place Chicago Cubs, for the second straight year. Aaron didn't even place second.

"Playing in a larger city would have helped me win two or three more MVP awards," said Aaron, who won the award only after Milwaukee's World Championship season of 1957. He had to settle for Player of the Year trophies given by *The Sporting News* in 1956 and 1963.

"When you hit home runs, people forget about the other things you can do," Aaron suggested. "It's like when a player comes up from the minor leagues and misses a fly ball. Everybody thinks he's a bad fielder."

"My defensive skills were certainly overlooked. People never thought about me winning Gold Gloves, but I have three of them in my trophy case."

People also forgot that Hank Aaron could run. He joined the

30/30 club in 1963 and might have crashed the 40/40 barrier if the Braves hadn't been overly concerned about losing their top slugger to an injury. He had only one disability -- a broken ankle in September of his rookie year.

As a young player, speed kept Aaron out of slumps. As the speed faded in his later years, he relied on experience.

"I had my share of slumps, but I didn't have them very long," said the man who played in 24 All-Star games. "I was always able to figure them out."

"Early in my career, I did a lot of bunting and that kept me out of slumps. I could bunt the ball about as well as anybody in baseball."

"In my last eight or nine years, I was using nothing but experience. I was just bubbling with confidence."

Bobby Bragan, who became manager of the Milwaukee Braves in 1963, provided a helping hand along the way.

According to Aaron, "Bobby refined my overall ability to play the game and told me the things I needed to do in order to move up another notch as a ballplayer. He wanted me to run, to

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n. steal bases a little more, to be more aggressive, and I went after it.

"He moved me from fourth to third in the lineup so I could get as many at-bats as possible. He also wanted to make sure I got to bat in the first inning. It helped because I started to average more at-bats per season."

The batting order change coincided with the decline of Eddie Mathews, who combined with Aaron to hit a record 863 home runs during the time they were teammates (1954-1966). On June 8, 1961, Aaron, Mathews, Joe Adcock, and Frank Thomas became the first teammates to hit four consecutive home runs.

"Eddie helped me tremendously," said Aaron of Mathews, a fellow member of the 500 Home Run Club. "Our record doesn't get the recognition I think it should, but it is very important to me."

"Anytime you have someone hitting behind you, or in front of you, who poses an equal threat, it has to be a great help."

Aaron also shares the record for home runs by brothers. The late Tommie Aaron, who later became a successful minor-league manager, hit 300 home runs during several stints with the Braves from 1962 to 1971.

"Even when he was alive, I felt Tommie would have been much better off playing in another organization," Hank Aaron said. "It was tough for him to come behind me after what I had done. The fans were always thinking he should have been as good as his brother, and he was certainly aware of how they felt."

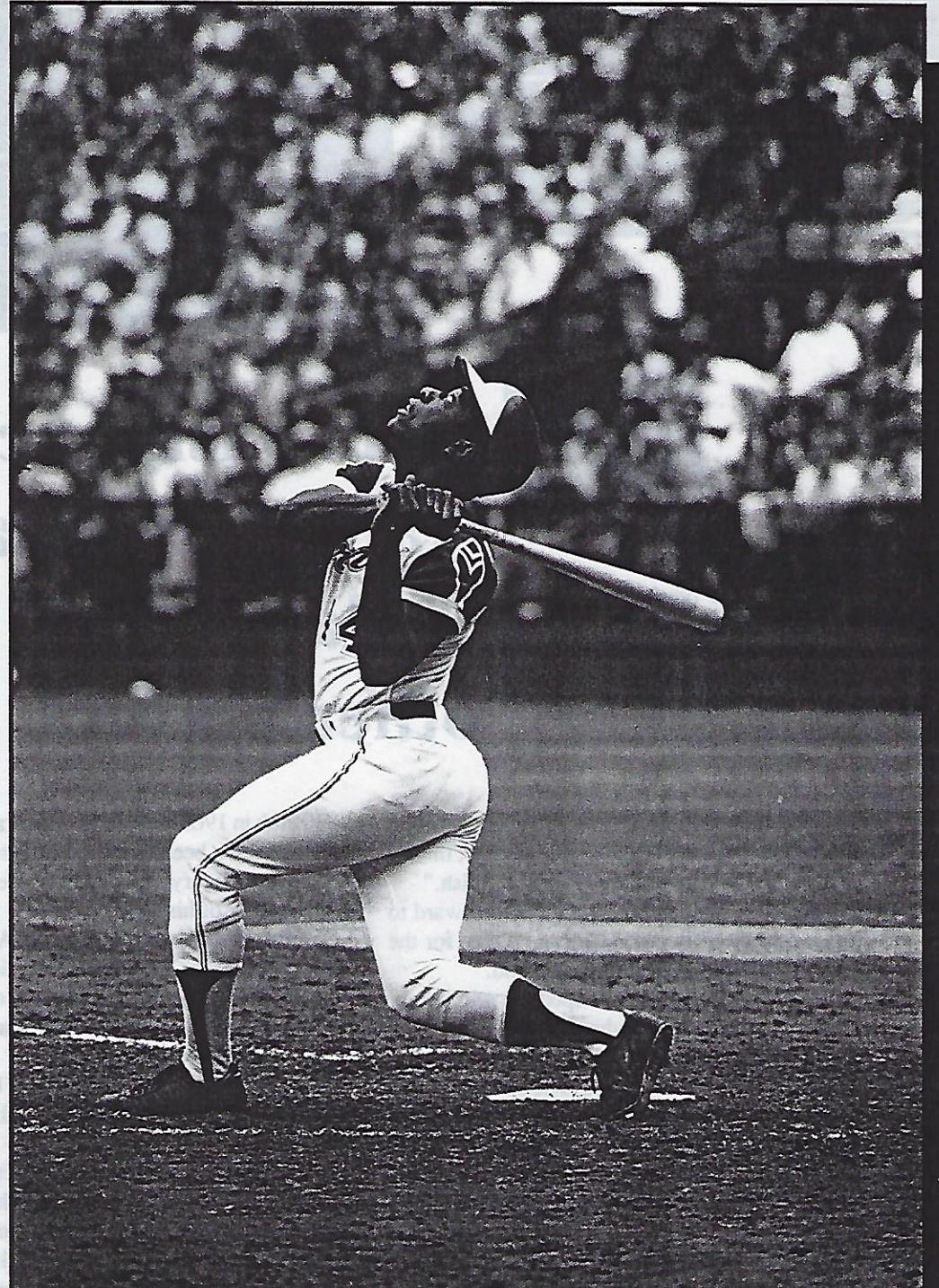
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With his records cast in stone, Hank looks mostly toward the future.



HANK!

Cont'd from page 19

Before losing his life to leukemia, Tommie Aaron had been regarded as a strong candidate to manage in the majors. Henry did not share that ambition.

"I never wanted to be a manager or general manager," said the older Aaron, who served as the Braves' vice president and director of player development for 13 years before advancing to his present position.

"Tommie had all the right qualifications, and there are other black players who are capable of doing those jobs."

Aaron addresses that issue in his best-selling book, I Had a Hammer, published this spring by Harper-Collins.

"The book doesn't just deal with baseball," he explained. "It deals with some of the trials, tribulations, and tough times I went through and some of the things that happened to me and my children."

"The book is full of surprises. I talk about the period from 1947, when Jackie Robinson broke in, to 1953, when I got into professional baseball. I talk about some of the things that happened in 1957 and some of the things that happened when I was challenging Babe Ruth's record. Some people were not overjoyed that a black person was challenging one of the most prestigious records in sports."

Ben Geraghty, Aaron's manager at Jacksonville in the Sally League in 1953, gets special credit in the book for protecting Aaron and several black teammates from the racial slurs hurled by baseball fans and even opposing managers and players.

"He helped me through some tough times," Aaron ac-

knowledged. "If not for Ben Geraghty, I think I would have quit baseball."

Fans of the Braves are glad he didn't. Aaron won two batting crowns, four home run titles, and led the National League in runs batted in four times and runs scored three times. He hit .364 in World Series play and hammered three homers in the three-game Championship Series of 1969.

The biggest hit of his career might have been the 11th-inning homer that clinched Milwaukee's first pennant on September 23, 1957.

"It was probably the most important hit I had, because we were a young team and we were struggling at the time," he remembered. "We had a few veterans, like Warren Spahn, and maybe one or two other guys, but none of us had ever been through anything like that."

"We went into the 11th inning and I hit a home run off Billy Muffett of the Cardinals to clinch the pennant. It was a tremendous thrill not only for me and my teammates, but also for the City of Milwaukee and State of Wisconsin. It was a great moment for all of us."

Another special homer came on July 25, 1972, when Atlanta hosted its first All-Star Game. Aaron, who had hit only one previous All-Star homer, connected against Gaylord Perry, a 1991 Hall of Fame inductee.

The shot gave the National League a 2-1 lead and sent shock waves through the crowd of 53,107. They rose to give Aaron a standing ovation -- one of three he received that evening.

Nearly 20 years later, Aaron still cherishes the moment: "Anytime you can do anything in front of your own fans -- especially on a special occasion like an All-Star or World Series game -- it sends chills through your body."

Playing half his games in Atlanta Stadium, where the Braves relocated in 1966, probably provided Aaron with the impetus he needed to catch Babe Ruth.

"Oh yes, there's no question about it," he suggested. "The ballpark was made for me. I didn't have to worry about the wind, and the altitude certainly helped. It was a great ballpark for me."

Early in his career, Aaron's home park was a handicap.

"When we began playing in Milwaukee County Stadium, it bothered just about everybody," he revealed. "It was open in center field and the wind came off the lake, so the ball wouldn't carry as well as it did when they enclosed the ballpark."

"After it was enclosed, I had a couple of years where I hit 40-odd home runs. So I can't say the park hurt me."

Don Drysdale, though

Aaron's favorite victim, was no country cousin. Quite the contrary, in fact.

"I know I hit a lot of home runs (17) off him, but that doesn't mean he was easy," Aaron said of the former Dodger sidearm. "By no stretch of the imagination was he easy."

"He was awfully tough: you never knew when he was going to shave you a little bit."

"I would say Curt Simmons was tough on me and I would also name Bob Gibson and Tom Seaver. I could name a lot of guys."

Simmons also had a healthy respect for Aaron: he once said that trying to sneak a fastball by Hank Aaron was like trying to sneak the sun past a rooster.

Not many pitchers succeeded. Aaron finished his career with a .305 batting average, 2,298 runs batted in,

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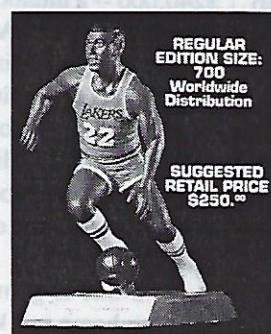


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HANK!

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2,174 runs scored, and 240 stolen bases. He reached double figures in doubles, triples, and homers three different seasons, and had 11 seasons of at least 100 runs batted in. The man who made No. 44 famous produced matching home run totals four times.

Such statistics leave little room for regret, but Hank Aaron has one.

"The only thing I didn't do was win a Triple Crown," he said. "I should have."

The coveted crown, symbolic of league leadership in batting average, home runs, and runs batted in, has gone unclaimed in the National League since 1937 (Joe Medwick) and unclaimed in the majors since 1967 (Carl Yastrzemski).

The Hall of Fame election process rivals the Triple Crown void as a personal disappointment for Aaron. Though elected in his first year of eligibility in 1982, Aaron got just 406 of a possible 415 votes -- missing unanimous election by nine votes.

Getting the highest percentage since Ty Cobb received 98.2 per cent in 1936 did not mollify Aaron's hurt feelings.

"The people who vote say they don't vote for anyone unanimously, but I think that's nonsense," he insisted. "Certain players deserve that honor. I felt very badly about it and I'm sure Willie Mays, Ted Williams, Stan Musial, and Warren Spahn did too. If a player deserves a unanimous vote, no one should take it away."

Aaron's opinions count heavily in his current job as consultant to Atlanta general manager John Schuerholz and

team president Stan Kasten. He writes reports, evaluates major and minor-league talent, and provides input about potential trades.

Apart from the Braves, he finds time for his Arby's roast beef restaurants in Milwaukee, occasional card shows, regular games of tennis, and his family.

"My wife Billye is the most wonderful woman I've ever been involved with," he said. "My children are all pretty much independent. I have a daughter working with an insurance company, a daughter with AT&T, a daughter going to graduate school in Spain, a son teaching school in Milwaukee, and a son working for Delta Airlines."

Aaron's obligations to the Braves, business, and family leave little time for the lucrative card show circuit -- or even for collecting.

"I wish I did collect," he admitted. "I'd be one step ahead of the game."

"Last year, I made three card shows, and this year I'll probably do three more. I just don't have the time. I wish I could go to one every week, but I don't think I need to."

Card shows could provide supplemental income to the superstar whose top salary was \$240,000 -- a pittance by modern standards. But Aaron won't let greed dominate his decisions.

"I don't even think about it, because it's never going to happen," he said. "I'm like Satchel Paige. I don't like to look back, because someone may be gaining on me."

No one is gaining on the all-time home run king. With his records and his stature cast in stone, he thinks mostly about the future.

"I played 23 years and enjoyed every moment of it, but we still have a long way to go," he explained. "I would like baseball to be the all-American

game it's supposed to be and give everyone a chance to participate."

Dan Schlossberg of Fair Lawn, N.J. is the only North American journalist who writes exclusively about baseball and travel. He is the author of 12 baseball books, including a 1972 biography of Hank Aaron.

Rookies

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these highly touted rooks suffered a decrease in value.

After enjoying a 22 homer/80 RBI season, Griffey is quickly becoming the yardstick by which all others will be measured. His '90 cards, which for the most part are not even his rookie cards since he made several appearances in 1989, are doubling and tripling in value faster than they can print the guides.

Olerud was the exception to the rest, showing a healthy

growth pattern in the guides. His '90 Score card jumped from \$1.50 to \$2.50, and his '90 Upper Deck card went from \$2.00 to \$3.75.

Isn't it always the case that the players that were least expected to provide mid-summer thrills on the diamond become the hot stove heroes, ringing up huge winter sales in the hobby. We're talking about players like Frank Thomas of the Chicago White Sox, Dave Justice of the Atlanta Braves, Kevin Maas of the New York Yankees, Delino DeShields of the Montreal Expos, or Ramon Martinez of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Keep close tabs on these cards. Their thermometers are already feverish, and should be among the top contenders for the hottest cards in 1991.

Andy Esposito is a freelance writer from New Hyde Park, New York and a writer for Inside Pitch, the Mets' team newspaper.



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