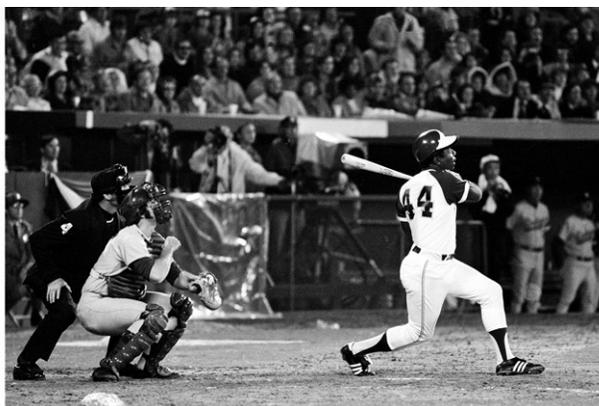


Hank Aaron's 715th Career Home Run (April 8, 1974)

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Essay by Curt Smith (guest post)*



Baseball, like life, can judge a person incompletely, thus unfairly. For most of his 1954-76 major-league career, Henry “Hank” Aaron was that kind of player: routinely superb, but lacking Mickey Mantle’s strength, Luis Aparicio’s flair, or Willie Mays’ celebrity.

Then, in 1973-74, Aaron pursued and finally touched baseball’s Holy Grail--Babe Ruth’s major-league career record of 714 home runs--America finding qualities in the Atlanta Braves slugger it had long overlooked. As poignant was a similar arc followed by Braves broadcaster Milo Hamilton, who famously called Henry’s No. 715.

Their odyssey began with Ruth’s 1895 birth in a poor part of Baltimore. In 1999, the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) voted The Bambino “the Greatest Player Ever.”¹ The title, wrote George Vecsey, “was Ruthian in its sweep. The man even had an adjective in his honor.”²

“Sports Illustrated” stated, “Be it his power at the plate, his popularity or his various appetites, the Babe was huge.”³ Such excess was alien to Aaron, through his youth was as bare. Born in 1934 in Mobile, Alabama, Henry was one of eight children in an African-American family. Unable to afford baseball equipment, Aaron practiced by hitting bottle caps with broomsticks, forging bats and balls out of scraps he found on streets.⁴

Meanwhile, no one taught him how to hit, the right-hander batting “cross-handed,” his right hand at the bottom of the bat handle and left hand above it. After Jackie Robinson integrated the majors in 1947, Aaron, at 15, failed a Brooklyn Dodgers big-league tryout.⁵ At 17, Hank wanted to join the Negro Leagues’ Indianapolis Clowns, his Mother agreeing if he finished high school. In the wider world, the man later known as “Hammerin’ Hank” or “The Hammer” found, as Jackie had, segregation’s cost.

Aaron never forgot eating breakfast in a Washington, DC, diner and hearing the help break all the plates in the kitchen after black players finished eating. “If dogs had eaten off those plates,” he said later, “they’d have washed them.”⁶ In 1952, the National League Boston Braves and New York Giants each offered the then-shortstop a contract, the Braves tending \$50 more. By

then, Hank was often called “Pork Chops” because “it was the only thing I knew to order off the menu.”⁷

In 1953, Aaron learned the accustomed way to bat, leading the Class-A South Atlantic League “in everything except hotel accommodations.”⁸ That year the Braves moved to Milwaukee, which nearly drowned its new club with love, drawing an National League home attendance record of 1,826,397 to County Stadium. Through 1959, the franchise waved two pennants, almost took two more, and won the 1957 World Series. Quiet and unruffled, its best player for a time was not its best-known.

In one year or another, Hank was voted the league’s Most Valuable Player, averaged .355, had 132 runs batted in, led in six batting categories, and in 1970-71 got hit No. 3,000 and went deep a career-high 47 times, respectively. “I came to the Braves on business,” he said, “and I intended to see that business was good as long as I could.”⁹ For Aaron, business thrived in Milwaukee—and Georgia, after the Braves again moved in 1966. In 1969, each league folded into two divisions, Atlanta taking the N.L. West, the franchise’s first title since 1958.

On July 21, 1973, Henry bashed his 700th homer. Georgia native and Detroit Tigers voice Harwell helped write the song “Move Over Babe (Here Comes Henry)”¹⁰--the latter by now at last increasingly synonymous with baseball. “Sports Illustrated’s” William Leggett asked whether 1973-74 would be a period in which Aaron either broke the white Ruth’s record in a then-overwhelmingly white nation or “was besieged with [racist] hate mail?”¹¹ The answer was both.

Years later, Henry related, “My kids had to live life 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 ballparks. I was getting threatening letters every single day.”¹² One missive read: “How about some sickle cell anemia, Hank?” Another named assassination days and sites: “Dear Hank Aaron, Retire or die!!! The Atlanta Braves will be moving around the country, and I’ll be moving with them.”¹³ By contrast, in late 1973, Aaron got a plaque from the US Postal Service for getting more pieces of mail (930,000) than any person that year, excluding politicians.¹⁴ Most showed America’s better side and wishing him well.

That winter famed author George Plimpton, writing a book titled “One for the Record,”¹⁵ “kept at me. I said, ‘Gotta be spontaneous,’”¹⁶ then-unsung 1966-75 Atlanta radio/TV voice Hamilton later said of the record-breaker. For his part, Aaron rebutted hate with excellence, showing how, as Ernest Hemingway said, “courage is grace under pressure.”¹⁷ His first 1974 swing on April 4’s Opening Day at Cincinnati tied the Babe at 714. Four days later, three future National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Ford C. Frick Award honorees for “broadcast excellence” called Atlanta’s first game at home; the broadcasters were: Vin Scully (named in 1982) and Curt Gowdy (1984), noted from coast to coast, and Milo (1992). Each seemed “spontaneous.”

Fortuitously, the Braves’ April 8 home opener was telecast on NBC’s “Monday Night Baseball,” network official Carl Lindquist musing, “Putting a town into a piece about [Gowdy] is like trying to establish residence for a migratory duck.”¹⁸ For a generation he forged the network’s quintessence of the World Series, All-Star Game, “Game of the Week,” and football’s Super

Bowl—and ABC’s “The American Sportsman” and PBS’s “The Way It Was.” Some felt sportscasting’s first George Foster Peabody awardee too bland for a hip and inchoate culture. More welcomed Curt’s objectivity, knowledge, and voice that John Updike likened to “everybody’s brother-in-law.”¹⁹

If Aaron hit No. 715 on April 8, a second voice to call it would be the icon whose “pull up a chair” became his 1950-2016 hello as voice of the Brooklyn, then Los Angeles, Dodgers: radio/TV’s longest single-team skein. Vin Scully remains the Roy Hobbs of baseball broadcasting, conjuring the film “The Natural: The Best There Ever Was.”²⁰ He aired 25 World Series, 12 All-Star Games, 19 no-hitters, and a brilliant 1983-89 run on “Game.” Towering was the Dodgers’ Kirk Gibson’s 1988 Series showstopper, the injured slugger going deep after seeming unable to even swing: “In a year that has been so improbable,” Vin cried, “the impossible has happened!”²¹

Named “Sportscaster of the 20th Century” by the American Sportscasters Association and “most memorable [L.A.] Dodgers personality,” Scully’s cachet as baseball’s Greek Homer renewed itself daily: “twilight’s little footsteps of sunshine”; “It was so hot today the moon got sunburned”; “He catches the ball gingerly, like a baby chick falling from the tree.” To Scully, a defensive-challenged catcher conjured the Ancient Mariner: “And he stoppeth one in three.” A dribbler-turned-infield hit recalled Eugene O’Neill’s “a humble thing, but thine own.”²²

The third voice, closest to Aaron’s wonderwork, had cracked the big leagues with the 1953 St. Louis Browns, later recalling, “I wasn’t ready [for the majors]. ’Course, neither were the Browns.”²³ Five times Hamilton involuntarily left one team for another. He also broadcast for 60 years²⁴ in 59 big-league parks,²⁵ at ease in all. “I’ll call a play, and have to say, ‘Ever see that before?’” Milo said. “My partner will say, ‘Nope.’ One ... memory triggers another.”²⁶ Glib and smooth, Hamilton, in addition, was said to own baseball’s “biggest briefcase,” statistics bulging his career.

“Holy Toledo!” was Milo’s signature, etching a small-town kid’s awe. Born in 1928 in Fairfield, Iowa, he grew up in the Depression learning how “people clung to baseball, Dad and friends talking at the cigar store.”²⁷ Mom brought bread late each day to save a penny, Hamilton using them for a 35 cent “Spalding Guide.” He joined the Navy, graduated from the University of Iowa, and one night did a Three-I League re-creation after calling basketball in the afternoon. “At the studio I find there’d been 37 walks in the double-header. How’d you like that final to a day?”²⁸

Unlike Aaron, office politics, not race, seared Milo: axed by the 1953 Browns-turned-Baltimore Orioles, 1954 St. Louis Cardinals, and 1958 Chicago Cubs. With the 1961-65 Chicago White Sox, he learned from lead voice Bob Elson, “Save something for a frantic finish. Go pell-mell earlier and you have nowhere to go.”²⁹ The Sox radio network knit the South. In 1965, an Atlanta luncheon crowd prior to a Chicago-Milwaukee exhibition greeted Milo like a native son. Wowed, the Braves suggested he join them next year for the franchise’s shift to Georgia.

By 1974, Atlanta boasted a 53-outlet radio and baseball-high 29-station TV network from the Carolinas to the Keys. On April 8, Milo, like Curt and Vin, showed how baseball didn’t need the

ensor of the brain to reach the heart. Gowdy was succinct, drawing TV verbal outlines verses radio's word-pictures. "[L.A. left-hander] Al Downing ready to pitch," Curt said in the fourth inning, 53,775 filling Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. "There's a long drive! Ball's hit deep! Deep! It is gone! He did it! He did it! Henry Aaron is the all-time home run leader now! Listen to this!"³⁰

On the Dodgers' KABC radio network, Scully said, "The outfield deep and straightaway. Fastball! There's a high drive into deep left-center field! [Bill] Buckner goes back! To the fence! It is gone!"³¹ Vin then rose, moved to the back of the booth, drank a glass of water, and hushed for more than a minute. Returning to the mic, he used parallel structure all around. "What a marvelous moment for baseball. What a marvelous moment for Atlanta and the state of Georgia. What a marvelous moment for the country and the world. *A black man is getting an ovation in the Deep South for breaking a record of an all-time baseball idol.* [Emphasis added.] *And it is a great moment for all of us, and particularly for Henry Aaron.*"³²

Scully's "scene and atmosphere ... [emphasized] civil rights, using the crowd as a person," said future ESPN's Jon Miller. Yet to many the most contemporary call was made by the voice identified with Aaron. "Milo's [radio account]... is heard the most," Jon observed in 2007. "It was a better sound bite, focusing on the event, a highlight that plays well,"³³ even now. Hamilton began: "He's sittin' on 714. Here's the pitch by Downing . . . swinging . . . There's a drive into left-center field! That ball is gonna be-ee . . . outta here! It's gone! It's 715!" clearing the fence into reliever Tom House's glove. "There's a new home-run champion of all time! And it's Henry Aaron!"³⁴

"Fireworks are going! Henry Aaron's coming around third!" Milo continued. The din did not abate. "His teammates are at home plate! Listen to this crowd!"³⁵ The game was halted to honor him. Georgia governor Jimmy Carter, seated with wife Rosalynn and Mother Lillian, left their box seats to give No. 44 a special automobile tag: HR-715. Thereafter, Braves interest unsurprisingly plunged, "folks . . . smell[ing] us," said Hamilton, "all the way to Chattanooga."³⁶ In the next decade, front office or booth conflict led him to leave the Braves, Pirates, and again Cubs--almost '50s *déjà vu*.

Postlude: Ruth was electric; Milo's greatest subject, eclectic. Aaron ranks first in runs batted in, total bases, and extra-base hits; second, home runs and times at-bat; third, games played and hits; and fourth in runs scored³⁷--in the SABR great players poll, behind only Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Ted Williams.³⁸ "Trying to throw a fastball by him," pitcher Curt Simmons said, "is like trying to sneak a sunrise past a rooster."³⁹ Aptly, in the latest 2004 "Total Baseball" book Aaron's name is the first listed alphabetically among all non-pitchers ever appearing in at least one big-league game.

In 1974, liking Milwaukee and the American League's designated hitter, Henry was traded at his request back to that city's five-year-old Brewers franchise. He retired in 1976 with a then-record 755 homers, became a Braves executive, made the Hall of Fame in 1982, received the US Medal of Freedom in 2002, and died in 2021.⁴⁰ Most obituaries accented his contribution to equality, how far he had come from boyhood, and his pursuit of the King of Clout, which Hamilton so memorably described.

In 1985, Milo joined his eighth big-league team, including the Cubs twice: through 2012 the still longest-running voice of the Houston Astros. Belatedly, like Aaron, he received the public handclapping too long denied. Hamilton was a family man, a fine, even beloved Lone Star fit. In 2005, wife Arlene died after nearly 53 years of marriage. Milo died a decade later, Henry saying, “[He] and I were friends for many years. I had great respect for his knowledge of baseball.” A supreme salute followed: “For me, he was in a class with Vin Scully.”⁴¹

One day a number of years earlier, Milo began reliving the Depression with Stan Musial and Bob Feller on Induction Weekend at the Hall of Fame. “All of a sudden I start thinking of my parents,” said Hamilton. At that point Brooks Robinson and Johnny Bench requested autographs of Hall members, including Frick honorees like him.

The moment evoked boyhood: “grown men playing a kids’ game in short pants,”⁴² said Milo. Suddenly, the dreams of Fairfield, Iowa and Cooperstown seemed veins from a common mine. Like Mobile’s Henry Aaron, buoyed by work and pride, Milo Hamilton came from that America, and never forgot it.

Curt Smith’s 18 books include “Voices of The Game,” named by “Esquire” magazine among “the 100 Best Baseball Books Ever Written.” “USA Today” terms him “the voice of authority on baseball broadcasting.” He also wrote more speeches than anyone for George H. W. Bush in his 1989-93 presidency. Smith is now Senior Lecturer of English at the University of Rochester.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.