Baseball Legend and Civil Rights Pioneer Hank Aaron Dead at 86

Aaron broke Babe Ruth's home run record in 1974, fielding racism along the way.

February 3, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient and Baseball Hall of Fame inductee Hank Aaron, who in 1974 set a home run record that would stand for more than 33 years, died January 22, two and a half weeks shy of his 87th birthday. His onetime team the Atlanta Braves announced that Aaron died in his sleep but did not disclose the cause of death, reports the The Associated Press.

Born in 1934 in a poor and predominantly Black section of Mobile, Alabama, Aaron was something of an athletic prodigy. While not particularly tall or muscular, he possessed powerful wrists that made his swing formidable. Before joining the Braves in 1954 at age 20, he played for the Indianapolis Clowns, a Negro American Leagues team, and the Eau Claire Bears, one of the Braves' Minor League Baseball teams.

But during the nascent days of the civil rights movement, Black success in professional sports invited danger in addition to fame and fortune. Over the course of 23 playing seasons, Aaron was inundated with hate mail and constant reminders of his perceived inferiority, according to The New York Times. In interviews, he often recounted how he once heard staff at a restaurant in Washington, DC, break the plates and bowls he and his Clowns teammates had eaten from rather than reuse them.

"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," he said.

The death threats reached a fever pitch when it became apparent that Aaron was fast closing in on Babe Ruth's home run record of 714. On April 8, 1974, Aaron broke it to a roar of applause, making baseball history. The social significance of the moment was not lost on commentator Vin Scully.

"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," Scully said. "A Black man is getting a standing ovation in the Deep South for breaking a record of an all-time baseball idol."

Later that year, the Braves traded Aaron to the Milwaukee Brewers.

His legacy guaranteed, in 1976, Aaron retired from baseball but not from public life. He dabbled in business and politics for a time, even serving as campaign treasurer for his brother-in-law David Scott's successful 2003 run for Congress.

Aaron's athletic accomplishments as well as his stoicism in the face of blatant racism were recognized countless times in the 44 years between his retirement and death. In 1999, Major League Baseball named the prestigious Hank Aaron Award for him. In 2002, President George W. Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States. In 2009, the Baseball Hall of Fame opened a permanent exhibit dedicated to his life.

But the racial abuse Aaron endured remained with him for the rest of his days. Of the months leading up to April 8, 1974, which many would consider the high point of his career, he told the Times, "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.... 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."

For more health-related news about Major League Baseball, read "Major League Baseball to Begin Testing Players for Opioids." For more on civil rights pioneers and Black celebrities who died this year, read "Civil Rights Icon John Lewis Dies of Pancreatic Cancer at 80" and "'Black Panther' Actor Chadwick Boseman Dies of Colon Cancer at 43."

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