

Baseball great and cultural icon Willie Mays dies at 93

Eric London
19 June 2024

On Tuesday night, baseball great Willie Howard Mays III died at the age of 93 at an assisted care facility in Northern California.

Mays was unquestionably among the greatest world athletes of the 20th century. A fierce competitor and buoyant personality, Mays became a cultural icon, hitting 660 home runs in 22 major league seasons, collecting 3,293 hits, driving in 1,909 runs and scoring 2,068 times, all ranking among the best all time. He batted .301 for his career, stole 339 bases, won the Rookie of the Year award when he debuted in 1951 just four years after the league was integrated and was selected to the All-Star game 24 times. (There were two all-star games per season for a time.)

Willie Mays was one of the best hitters of all time, but what set him apart was his speed and remarkable defensive abilities, which are breathtaking even for non-baseball fans. He received 12 Gold Gloves for an acrobatic, flashy and nonchalant style of defense in center field that won the hearts of fans of even opposing teams. He won two Most Valuable Player awards and was the oldest living member of the Hall of Fame at the time of his death. He played 21 seasons for the New York and San Francisco Giants (the team moved West in 1958) and one and a half for the New York Mets at the end of his career. He also played a year professionally for the Birmingham Black Barons in the Negro League as a 17 year old in 1948.

Baseball fans have argued for decades over whether Mays was the best player in the history of the game. These arguments have been more or less settled by the application of modern technology, allowing statisticians to better measure the impact of defensive skills and baserunning to their team's odds of winning. Of all players in the era following the racial integration of the major leagues who were not implicated in the steroid scandal of the late 1990s and early 2000s, updated statistics show Mays won his team approximately 10 games more over the course of his career than the second best player, Hank Aaron of the Milwaukee and Atlanta Braves, and 45 ahead of New York Yankees center fielder Mickey Mantle.^[1]

It is difficult to convey to international audiences Mays' cultural prominence. At a time when it was rare for African Americans to appear on television, he was a regular guest on late night television and was the first African American to appear, as himself, on programs like *Bewitched*, *Mr. Belvedere* and *The Donna Reed Show*. Frank Sinatra told him, "If I played baseball like you, I'd be the happiest guy in the world." Cary Grant, a fan of the archrival Dodgers, joked, "I can't stand Willie Mays." His longtime team manager, Leo Durocher, said "if he could cook, I'd marry him" and suggested that his left and right fielders would be better off building shacks and resting in them while Mays covered the entire outfield. Popular songs were composed about his catchphrase—"Say Hey!"—with which he commonly greeted people, and he was known as "the Say Hey kid."

Baseball has deep social and historical roots. It was the first American sport with a genuine mass audience, facilitated largely by the advent of the radio and then television. Versions of baseball initially developed with

local variations in the Northeastern United States, but the game was "nationalized" in the 19th century by Union soldiers in the Civil War who taught it to Confederates during truces and in prisons and spread it to the South. A pastoral game with a large, spacious field, it grew immensely popular in the cramped tenement districts of America's growing cities (especially New York, Boston, Chicago, Baltimore and more). Baseball was particularly popular among immigrants and became a means of cultural assimilation for millions arriving at the turn of the 20th century and beyond.

The social origins of Willie Mays

Willie Mays—and "Willie," not William, is his birthname—was born May 6, 1931, in the depths of the Great Depression, in a working class family living in Westfield, Alabama. His grandfather, Walter Mays, had been a sharecropper in Tuscaloosa and was reputed to have been an excellent "country pitcher" in the rural leagues that then predominated in central Alabama. Walter Mays' son, William Mays, was a steelworker and later a Pullman porter on the Birmingham-Detroit line who was an excellent baseball player himself, an outfielder and slap-the-ball leadoff hitter who acquired the nickname "Cat" for his speed and nimble defense.

Westfield was a company town comprised of shotgun houses that was "run by the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company," according to Mays and baseball writer John Shea in Mays' 2020 autobiography 24, named after the number that he wore on his jersey. In Westfield, "the company owned houses and stores," the autobiography explains, and conditions were poor.

When Mays was a child, he and his father moved next door to Fairfield, which was and remains a center of national steel production. His mother, Annie Satterwhite, was a locally known athlete in her own right but left the family when Mays was an infant. Satterwhite lived nearby and remained a presence in Mays' life but died giving birth to her 11th child when Mays was in his early 20s.

Like many industrial areas, Birmingham's many factories often had baseball teams—one black and one white—that competed in segregated semi-professional leagues. Though the teams were established by the companies as a means to promote "corporate pride" and to stifle dissent, there is no doubt the "industrial leagues" were immensely popular among both black and white workers. Crowds of between 8,000 and 12,000 fans dressed up in their Sunday best to watch games between teams with names like the "Fairmont Foundrymen," the "Ingalls Ship Builders," the "Stephenson Brick Tilemen" and the "Woodard Iron Men," comprised of both paid players and workers from the different plants.

Mays attended an industrial high school and, had it not been for his remarkable athleticism, was likely destined for a life in the steel mill. He

was trained as a clean, dye and press man and said in his autobiography that most of his childhood friends would finish school and “walk right over there and go work in the steel mill.”

Instead, Mays got his start playing baseball for a local sandlot team, the Fairfield Gray Sox, before eventually joining his father’s mill team in the industrial league. He regularly played against boys who were 5 or 10 years older than he was. He would later dedicate his autobiography “to my father, Willie Howard Mays, Sr., who taught me about life, and to the people of Fairfield, Alabama, who helped raise me.” When he broke into the major leagues, Mays was famous for playing stickball with New York’s tenement children on his way from Harlem to and from the Giants’ stadium.

Mays was 16 in 1947 when Jackie Robinson, the first African American player allowed to play in the major leagues, debuted for the Brooklyn Dodgers. By age 17 Mays was playing for the Birmingham Black Barons, a marquis franchise in the Negro Leagues who played at Rickwood Field, one of the oldest remaining ballparks in the United States, older than every major league stadium. In 1950, Mays was signed by the New York Giants, and after brief stints for their minor league affiliates, the Trenton Giants and Minneapolis Millers, he played in his first major league game on May 25, 1951 against the Philadelphia Phillies. After a slow start (he went 0-12 and broke down in tears in the clubhouse), Mays caught fire and led the Giants as they miraculously caught the arch-rival Dodgers to win the pennant.

“The Catch”

Mays missed part of the 1952 season and all of the 1953 season when he was conscripted into the US Army during the Korean War, and had it not been for this disruption, his career totals would have doubtless been even higher. The Giants returned to the World Series again in 1954, Mays’ first year back from the Army.

In the first game of the seven-game series in one of the first World Series televised to a substantial portion of the population, Mays made what is popularly understood to be the most important and spectacular play in professional baseball history, commonly referred to as “The Catch.”

The center field fence at the Giants’ home stadium—the Polo Grounds—was about 480 feet from home plate, a distance roughly 80 feet farther than other ballparks. This gave Mays an immense amount of ground to cover. Late in a tied 2-2 game and with runners on first and second bases, Cleveland Indians slugger Vic Wertz hit a ball that travelled some 420 to 460 feet (the exact length has been subject to serious scientific dispute). Mays raced backwards, somehow making it to the spot of the ball, and made a catch over his shoulder almost without looking back. Perhaps most impressively, he spun around immediately and fired the ball back to second base to prevent runners from tagging and advancing to the next base. The Giants won the game and the Series, despite being underdogs.

Mays’ career contains too many superlative moments to list. He hit four home runs in a game in 1961 against the Milwaukee Braves. In 1963, he hit a game-winning home run to break a 0-0 tie in the 16th inning off of veteran Milwaukee Braves pitcher Warren Spahn to end what is considered the best pitcher’s duel in baseball history, with both Spahn and Giants’ right-hander Juan Marichal pitching the entire game. (Marichal and Spahn both became Hall of Famers.) For substantial stretches of his career, managers gave Mays the ability to write the Giants’ lineups and make managerial decisions during games. In 1981, playing in an exhibition “old timers’ game” at the age of 50, Mays sprinted across

centerfield to make a basket catch before tumbling over onto the warning track.

Integration and Robinson’s criticism

Mays was not a politically outspoken person. Among the first African American players to follow Jackie Robinson into major league baseball, he spoke of the racial taunts he experienced early in his career, explaining that when he played minor league baseball, he was often required to stay in a different part of town than his white teammates. On one particularly dangerous occasion, Mays said that three white teammates crossed town and slept on the floor of his room to protect him from intruders.

When the New York Giants moved west to San Francisco following the 1957 season, Mays was refused a home in an affluent neighborhood of the city by a homeowner, who said he came under pressure from his neighbors. Mays was treated derisively at first by San Francisco fans who saw Mays as “replacing” in centerfield the beloved hometown hero Joe DiMaggio, who was from the San Francisco area and had played for the minor league San Francisco Seals before major league baseball moved West.

DiMaggio, born Giuseppe Paulo DiMaggio, was the son of Sicilian immigrants deemed “enemy aliens” by the US government during World War II and was among the first Italians to break through in the major leagues, making him a particular hero among San Francisco’s large Italian immigrant population. DiMaggio played for the New York Yankees, was a 13-time all-star, a 9-time World Series winner, and husband to Marilyn Monroe.

Mays did not often speak out on racial or political issues and was publicly criticized by Jackie Robinson, who wrote in his 1964 book *Baseball Has Done It* that Mays did not “wish to stir things up” and that “there’s no escape, not even for Willie ... from being a Negro.” In his 2020 autobiography, Mays responded, “Jackie did a lot of things for the race. I did what I did. I didn’t always go out and talk in the public. Sometimes I’d do it behind the scenes. ... I didn’t tell everyone what I did.”

Mays’ retirement

In 1972, at the end of his career and at a time when players were paid far less than they are today, Mays publicly supported the players in a strike against the team owners though a strike would have likely prevented him from ever playing a major league game again. “I know it’s hard being away from the game and our paychecks and our normal life,” he said. “I love this game. It’s been my whole life. But we made a decision ... to stick together and until we’re satisfied, we have to stay together. ... [If] I have played my last game, it will be painful. But if we don’t hang together, everything we’ve worked for will be lost.”

A strike was averted, and Mays retired in 1973 after making the World Series one last time as a member of the New York Mets, with whom he played for two seasons at ages 41 and 42. In one of his final at-bats, he hit a game-winning pinch-hit single in the 12th inning off Oakland A’s reliever (and future Hall of Famer) Rollie Fingers, though the Mets would go on to lose the series. Mays coached professionally for 10 years and then retired, becoming a regular fixture at the stadium of the San Francisco Giants, located at 24 Willie Mays Plaza. Today, by coincidence, the Giants and St. Louis Cardinals will play an official major league game

at the refurbished Rickwood Field in Birmingham, where a 17-year-old Mays played for the Negro League Black Barons some 70 years ago.

[1] More precisely, the statistic on which this is based values players at their worth compared with the average replacement player (“Wins Above Replacement”). Mays was worth 156.2 wins above replacement over the course of his career. Aaron, also from Alabama, was worth 143.1. Mantle, the son of a mining family from Commerce, Oklahoma, was worth 110.2, though his career was plagued by injuries and alcohol abuse. At a banquet held later in their lives, Mantle tearfully told Mays that Mays was the better player. Mays, a competitor until the end, did not dispute Mantle’s conclusion.



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