

Remembering the great Willie Mays

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Willie Howard Mays was the most exciting baseball player I ever saw in some 55 years of watching baseball games. In all, he played 22 years in the major leagues for the New York Giants, San Francisco Giants, and New York Mets. He was among the first of the African-American players who followed Jackie Robinson into Organized Baseball.

He finished his career with a .302 lifetime batting average and 660 home runs. Only Henry Aaron and Babe Ruth hit more. He had speed as well as power, leading the National League in stolen bases four years in a row.

Roger Angell described him best in his 1972 *The Summer Game*: "One thinks of Willie Mays, in the best of his youth, batting at the Polo Grounds, his whole body seeming to leap at the ball as he swings in an explosion of exuberance. Or Mays in center field, playing in so close that he appears at times to be watching the game from over the second baseman's shoulder, and then that same joyful leap as he takes off after a long, deep drive, running so hard and so far that the ball itself seems to stop in the air and wait for him."

Arnold Hano's *A Day in the Bleachers*, first published in 1955, contains an interesting — and quite insightful — portrait of Mays at the very beginning of his major league career. The book recounts the Giants' 5-2 victory, in the first of a four-game sweep of the Cleveland Indians in the 1954 World Series.

Hano quotes Cleveland manager Al Lopez on the subject of Mays' batting. In the Spring of 1954, Lopez was not particularly impressed, saying after watching Mays through spring training that "Mays was a .270 hitter who might hit .300, . . . if he'd only learn to bunt down the third base line." Lopez was probably thinking of the Mays of 1951 and 1952, when he had hit .272 and .236. Mays had spent most of the 1952 and all of the 1953 season in the army.

Hano himself had the benefit of watching Mays' spectacular 1954 season, when among many other accomplishments, he'd led the National League in both batting and slugging percentage. Nevertheless, Hano was not particularly impressed, either, writing that "Mays does not inspire my hopes at the plate as he used

to. This is foolish on my part, because he is a far better hitter now than he was when I felt that with every swing he'd hit a home run. I cannot help it; I harbor the feeling that Al Lopez was right, that Mays is a .270 hitter who might hit .300 with some luck. It was against the rules that he hit more than that in 1954, so undisciplined does he seem." As it turned out, Mays was a lifetime .300 hitter with plenty of power.

Hano, though, locates Mays' genius as a ballplayer in his fielding, not his hitting. The first game of the 1954 World Series provides the perfect occasion for this, involving, as it does, what was immediately known as "The Catch."

Mays' catch of Vic Wertz's eighth inning drive in deep right-center field with the potential winning run on base was one of the central events of the game. Mays taking Wertz's drive over his left shoulder as he approaches the warning track just right of straight-away center field is on the cover of both editions of Hano's book.

Hano's treatment of "The Catch" is revealing. He says nothing of the *length* of Wertz's drive, but says that he had never seen a ball hit as *hard* as Wertz hit this one. Hano characterizes Wertz's drive as "not the longest ball ever hit in the Polo Grounds, not by a comfortable margin." It may seem surprising that the first thing Hano says of his reaction to the hardest hit he ever saw was "I was not immediately perturbed." But like all Giant fans in 1954, Hano was used to Mays' ability to catch anything that stayed in the ballpark. I listened to the regular Giants' announcers' radio broadcast of the game, and was surprised to read in the papers the next day that Mays had made an unusually difficult play. Hano concludes that "had not Mays made that slight movement with his head as though he were going to look back in the middle of flight, he would have caught the ball standing still." Not exactly a routine catch, but Hano and the Giants' announcers and I weren't surprised that Willie had caught up with the ball.

Much of the time Hano spends on Mays in his book is concerned with Willie's throwing. He devotes two pages early in the book to Mays' practicing his throwing from the outfield during pregame warm-ups. He also comments on a throw to third that Mays made to hold Wertz to a double in the tenth inning: "Here was the final

climaxing of an exhibition of power, speed and accuracy that must be unequalled in any sport."

His throwing was surely the most wondrous dimension of this most wondrous ballplayer. Of everything in Charles Einstein's biography of Mays, *Willie's Time*, I remember most vividly San Francisco Giant manager Bill Rigney's instruction to young Giant infielders: "When they hit it to him, . . . please go to a base. Don't confuse the issue by asking me why. Just *be there*." And

Paul Metcalf, with the instinct of poets, titled his poem celebrating Mays' outfielding "Willie's Throw." [Metcalf's poem — which commemorates another of Mays' famous fielding plays — is most readily available in Richard Grossinger and Lisa Conrad's *Baseball I Gave You All the Best Years of My Life* (Fifth edition, 1992) or Tercalf's *Collected Works, Volume Two, 1976-1986* (1997).]

Mays' fielding genius — particularly his throwing — distin-

guished him from the other slugging outfielders of the 1950s and 1960s: Henry Aaron, Mickey Mantle, Frank Robinson. Tommy Henrich, New York Yankees outfielder, once commented on the difficulties of outfielding, saying "catching a fly ball is a pleasure, but knowing what to do with it after you catch it is a business." More than a great slugger, more than a fast man on the bases and in the outfield, Willie Howard Mays knew how to take care of business.



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