

1-22-2021

## Henry Aaron

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Henry Aaron" (2021). *On Sport and Society*. 859.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/859>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - HENRY AARON  
JANUARY 22, 2021

I was looking at email late this morning when there was a small notice at the top right on the screen from AJC (the Atlanta Journal Constitution). At first the title of the message didn't register with me as I saw it out of the corner of my eye. After several seconds it did register. The message was about Hank Aaron, and when I looked, I saw it was an announcement of the great man's death. This was the third such notice of the death of a member of the Atlanta Braves family that I received in the past four weeks: The first was Phil Niekro, the second Don Sutton, and now Hank Aaron.

As this sunk in, I looked over my left shoulder to just above the door of my office where I have one of my prized possessions, a poster of Aaron at bat wearing the number "44" and signed by Hank Aaron. When it was signed, Aaron was a member of the Milwaukee Brewers, and he was in Minneapolis for a game against the Minnesota Twins. I was not there, but my father was.

What follows is not an obituary or an assessment of Henry Aaron's great career. It is simply a few recollections drawn from my fan relationship that goes back to 1954 when Hank Aaron arrived in Milwaukee to join the Milwaukee Braves. I was still in primary school and had become an instant Braves fan, as it was now the closest major league city for those in the Upper Midwest.

Aaron was twenty and in his third year of what was then termed "Organized Baseball." In 1951, he signed with the Indianapolis Clowns champions of the Negro American League. In 1952, the Boston Braves acquired his contract and he played in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where he was rookie of the year. The following year, he played in Jacksonville, Florida, in the South Atlantic League (Sally League) as Aaron and four others broke baseball's racial barriers in the southeast. It was there that he faced vicious racist taunts of a nature similar to what he would face throughout his career, especially when he threatened Babe Ruth's career home-run record.

Many Braves games were on the radio in Minneapolis, although, for some it was necessary to rely on reception of distant stations offering play-by-play filled with static that faded in

and out. I listened to many of those games on radio, recorded some in my scorebook, and became a diehard Braves fan.

It was probably in the second year that Aaron was with the Braves that I saw my first major league baseball game. It was a night game in Milwaukee. I was with my parents, and we drove to the game, leaving Minneapolis in the morning and arriving before game time. We stayed overnight and returned home the next day. Warren Spahn pitched for the Braves and Vern Law for the Pirates. It was a Braves win, and the first time I saw Hank Aaron in person.

Over the next several years, I saw a few more games in Milwaukee, but after the Twins arrived in Minnesota in 1961, I was less caught up in Braves baseball. Aaron, however, remained in my sight, and the Braves remained my National League team. By that time, I was in college, finishing my degree at the University of Minnesota.

Two years later, Pat and I arrived in Milwaukee in the summer of the Braves final season in the city, and the Twins were moving toward their first World Series. In Milwaukee, we got to one of the last games played by the Braves before they headed south to become the Atlanta Carpetbaggers. It was a bitter departure and, for me, it was a formal break with the Braves, although Hank Aaron was still a favorite.

It was another four years before I ended up in Florida where major league baseball on radio and TV meant the Atlanta Braves. Initially, I could not bring myself to care much about the Braves, but then things changed. Hank Aaron was accumulating home runs and the Braves began a countdown to 714. Braves games became must see TV or must hear radio.

As the drama built so did my reconnection with the Braves. By the 1971 season, the Braves organization was promoting the pursuit of Ruth's record, and Hank Aaron was calling me back to Braves fandom. The excitement of the home run race pushed Milwaukee memories into the background. Braves owner Bill Bartholomay's move to Atlanta faded in the face of the excitement that kept growing. When our family travelled north, I always insisted that when passing through Atlanta, if the Braves were home, we would stop for a game. We had the good fortune of seeing many of those home runs that drove Aaron's total towards 714. Each one left you feeling you were watching history, and you were.

When at the beginning of the 1974 season the moment arrived, the nation was focused on Aaron and the Braves. One part of the nation, the racists and the haters, came out of the woodwork to harass and threaten Henry Aaron and his family. Death threats were common, racist taunts came in the mail and were sometimes shouted from the stands. Through it all, Henry Aaron persevered under enormous pressures. His dignity and calm was admired by fans, particularly as more was learned of the racist taunts and threats that followed him along the way.

When 714 came in Cincinnati at the beginning of the 1974 season, followed by 715 in Atlanta, a national television audience celebrated with the packed stadium, and with Aaron. April 8, 1974, was a wonderful evening as Hank Aaron launched a ball into the Atlanta Braves bullpen.

A few years later I was in Cooperstown and found a poster of that moment. It remained on the wall of my office at the University of Central Florida until my retirement five years ago. Not a day passed when I did not think of Henry Aaron and remember that moment, and so many more before and after.

If you look at the numbers that are now being printed across the baseball media, they are staggering. He was so much more than home runs. He was a complete player, a perennial all-star, and a great statesman for the game. His story is also a reminder of what Martin Luther King Jr. called the promissory note that the nation still is yet to deliver to African Americans.

Of all of the quotes that one can find about race in America, these words of Hank Aaron often come back to me: "Baseball has done a lot for me. It has taught me that regardless of who you are regardless of how much money you make, you are still a Negro."

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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