

6-27-2024

## Willie Mays, Ray Dandridge, and Me.

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Willie Mays, Ray Dandridge, and Me." (2024). *On Sport and Society*. 902.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/902>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - Willie Mays, Ray Dandridge, and  
Me.  
July 27, 2024

It has been a very busy last six weeks or more for me and in the world of sport. There have been any number of things that have attracted my attention and normally would have prompted some comment here. At some point, I will return to some of those issues and events. Today, I will concentrate on one.

Willie Mays died last week at the age of 93. To say he had a full and amazing life would be a gross understatement. The outpouring in print, on radio and television, and the many electronic media outlets was befitting such a life as his. Those who had the good fortune to see him play, in person, on film, or on television, knew immediately that they were watching greatness.

The numbers have appeared in all the obituaries and tributes, and they are staggering: 22 seasons, 660 home runs, 338 stolen bases, 3,293 hits, and a .301 lifetime batting average. But, as is often written about great athletes, the numbers tell only part of the story. Indeed, that was never more the case than with Willie Mays.

For me, Willie Mays was one of my first two baseball heroes. The other was his teammate with the Minneapolis Millers, third baseman Ray Dandridge. Both are now in the Hall of Fame. Both came from the Negro Leagues. One played in the majors and one did not, and therein lies another story.

I was nearly ten years old when I first saw both of them. They were part of the New York Giants system and playing for the Millers at Nicollet Park in Minneapolis. The dimensions of Nicollet Park were nearly identical to the Polo Grounds, the home field of the Giants. Nicollet Park is where I first saw the most spectacular catch I would ever see. It was also a catch that made Mays a legendary outfielder when he repeated that catch in the 1954 World Series. There, running with his back to home plate and making an over the shoulder catch, he robbed Vic Wertz. Then spun around and threw back into the infield doubling up a runner and preserving a tie in a game the Giants would win. I have often wondered just how many times he repeated that catch, "The Catch," on other stages.

Willie Mays had a very short stay in Minneapolis. In his five or six weeks with the Millers, he hit a blistering .477 and played centerfield as no one had done before. Clearly, the Giants could not leave him in Minneapolis. He made his debut with the Giants in late May of 1951. He had a very difficult start going 0-12 until hitting a home run off Warren Spahn of the Boston Braves. He continued to struggle, but, when he hit his stride, he helped lead the Giants to the NL pennant and was named Rookie of the Year. None of this was a surprise to baseball fans in Minneapolis.

Meanwhile, Ray Dandridge awaited the call from the Giants. It never came despite his spectacular play and the fact that Willie Mays repeatedly asked the Giants to bring Ray to New York. Dandridge was the best third baseman I have ever seen, a view also held by Bill Veeck. He had the ability to throw out runners by one step, no matter where he fielded the ball or the speed of the runner. I often imagined myself doing this in my backyard baseball fantasies.

It is likely that the Giants did not call Ray to the big club because of a racial quota. The Giants had four African-American players, so when Mays joined the team Artie Wilson was sent down to the minors.

Dandridge was also older than other potential rookies, and indeed no one was ever totally sure of his age. He would continue to play in leagues in the Upper Midwest well into the 1950s. When he joined the Millers, he was probably 35 years old. He had first played in the Negro National League at age 19.

In 1949, Dandridge was Rookie of the Year in the American Association hitting .362 with the Millers and, in 1950, he was the league MVP, leading his team to the pennant. He remained with the Millers through 1952 when he moved on to Oakland in the Pacific Coast League. He finished his professional career playing for the Bismark Barons in 1955 where he hit .360 at age 42.

A few years before his death I was able to meet him at his home in Palm Bay, Florida thanks to Jim Riley who wrote *Dandy, Day and the Devil*. This was an account of Negro League Stars Ray Dandridge, Leon Day, and Willie Wells. We spent close to an hour with Ray Dandridge that day. I was in awe and remember very little of that hour except the quiet graciousness of my hero.

These are among the memories that came to me last week when it was announced that Willie Mays was dead at age 93. We will all miss Willie Mays, and I still miss Ray Dandridge.

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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