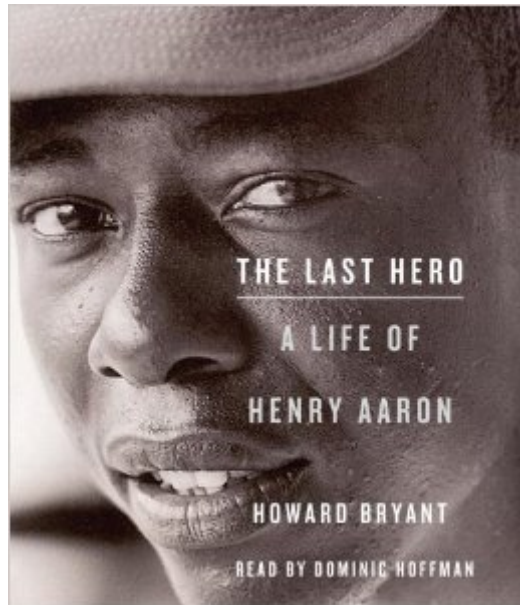


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The Last Hero: A Life Of Henry Aaron



Synopsis

In the thirty-four years since his retirement, Henry Aaron's reputation has only grown in magnitude: he broke existing records (rbis, total bases, extra-base hits) and set new ones (hitting at least thirty home runs per season fifteen times, becoming the first player in history to hammer five hundred home runs and three thousand hits). But his influence extends beyond statistics, and at long last here is the first definitive biography of one of baseball's immortal figures. Based on meticulous research and interviews with former teammates, family, two former presidents, and Aaron himself, *The Last Hero* chronicles Aaron's childhood in segregated Alabama, his brief stardom in the Negro Leagues, his complicated relationship with celebrity, and his historic rivalry with Willie Mays—all culminating in the defining event of his life: his shattering of Babe Ruth's all-time home-run record. Bryant also examines Aaron's more complex second act: his quest to become an important voice beyond the ball field when his playing days had ended, his rediscovery by a public disillusioned with today's tainted heroes, and his disappointment that his career home-run record was finally broken by Barry Bonds during the steroid era, baseball's greatest scandal. Bryant reveals how Aaron navigated the upheavals of his time—fighting against racism while at the same time benefiting from racial progress—and how he achieved his goal of continuing Jackie Robinson's mission to obtain full equality for African-Americans, both in baseball and society, while he lived uncomfortably in the public spotlight. Eloquently written, detailed and penetrating, this is a revelatory portrait of a complicated, private man who through sports became an enduring American icon. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

Audio CD

Publisher: Random House Audio; Abridged edition (May 11, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307736881

ISBN-13: 978-0307736888

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 1.1 x 5.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.8 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (55 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #2,027,927 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #228 in Books > Books on CD > Sports & Outdoors #1467 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Sports & Outdoors > Baseball #1957 in Books > Books on CD > Biographies & Memoirs

Customer Reviews

In the thirty-four years since his retirement, Henry Aaron's reputation has only grown in magnitude: he broke existing records (rbis, total bases, extra-base hits) and set new ones (hitting at least thirty home runs per season fifteen times, becoming the first player in history to hammer five hundred home runs and three thousand hits). But his influence extends beyond statistics, and at long last here is the first definitive biography of one of baseball's immortal figures. Based on meticulous research and interviews with former teammates, family, two former presidents, and Aaron himself, *The Last Hero* chronicles Aaron's childhood in segregated Alabama, his brief stardom in the Negro Leagues, his complicated relationship with celebrity, and his historic rivalry with Willie Mays—all culminating in the defining event of his life: his shattering of Babe Ruth's all-time home-run record. Bryant also examines Aaron's more complex second act: his quest to become an important voice beyond the ball field when his playing days had ended, his rediscovery by a public disillusioned with today's tainted heroes, and his disappointment that his career home-run record was finally broken by Barry Bonds during the steroid era, baseball's greatest scandal. Bryant reveals how Aaron navigated the upheavals of his time—fighting against racism while at the same time benefiting from racial progress—and how he achieved his goal of continuing Jackie Robinson's mission to obtain full equality for African-Americans, both in baseball and society, while he lived uncomfortably in the public spotlight. Eloquently written, detailed and penetrating, this is a revelatory portrait of a complicated, private man who through sports became an enduring American icon.

Questions for Howard Bryant on *The Last Hero*

Q: Why Henry Aaron?

A: After my second book, *Juicing the Game*, the natural progression for my thought process was heading toward one question: "Who in baseball do you admire? Is there anyone this sport can be proud of?" It wasn't simply the fatigue of writing about steroids and tainted heroes that drifted me toward Henry Aaron, but because the steroids scandal occurring during the same time as the housing-and-mortgage scandal told me something larger was taking place in this country, that the value systems we ostensibly seek--honor, integrity, accountability--were becoming almost quaint. In baseball, as the drug scandal intensified, players would tell me, "If you ain't cheating, you ain't trying." It was that level of cynicism that made me consider writing about someone who certainly was not perfect but had a larger mission for himself beyond money, that here was a person for whom those values are not quaint.

Q: Did he cooperate?

A: It took roughly eighteen months for him to agree to speak with me. I first began working on this project in May 2006 and that was in the middle of when Barry Bonds was nearing Henry's record. Henry Aaron wanted nothing to do with the Bonds record chase. He didn't want to be asked questions about Bonds, did not want to be

placed in the debate about anabolic steroids. He did not want to engage at all. When Henry's attorney, Allan Tanenbaum, and I spoke for the first time, he was extremely pessimistic about the book and the public's reaction to Henry Aaron. He was convinced that the public did not care about him except in being positioned as the polar opposite of Bonds. He was certain that I was only interested in one thing: Bonds. Over many phone calls spanning several months (the key conversation taking place over Thanksgiving 2007), Allan finally accepted that my motives for writing the book had nothing to do with Bonds and everything to do with a man I considered to be an American icon. A few months later, on January 31 (ironically on Jackie Robinson's birthday), Henry Aaron and I had our first phone call. He was extremely pleasant and engaging but echoed Allan's sentiments about his own life. "People don't care about me," he told me. "They only care about what I did as a baseball player. There's more to me than that." I was amazed at the considerable divide that existed between the enthusiasm I received whenever I mentioned the possibility of writing about Henry and what he considered to be the public's perception of him. Q: What most surprised you during the writing/research? A: There were many surprising aspects of the research, which is why I truly love to research and write books. Whatever your initial thoughts of your subject are, they will invariably be altered the deeper you learn. I was as guilty as anyone in following the accepted Aaron myth: played in Milwaukee, was always overshadowed by players in bigger markets, snuck up on even the shrewdest evaluators of talent from the day he entered the big leagues to the day when suddenly he and not Willie Mays was in the best position to break Babe Ruth's all-time home run record. None of this is true, and that was the most surprising thing. Henry Aaron was a phenom, a top prospect from the day he joined the Indianapolis Clowns. He was a comet tearing through each level in the minor leagues, and when he arrived for his first spring in Bradenton, Florida in 1954, all eyes were on him to be the next great player. The myth came later. As the Milwaukee Braves fell in the standings at the beginning of the 1960s, people did begin to forget about Henry, and he quietly accumulated Hall of Fame numbers. But that was only because the public lost interest in a losing team, not because it was unaware of his enormous ability. Q: What is the lasting legacy of Henry Aaron? A: A famous sociologist told me during an interview that the steroid scandal has created a gap between the record holders and the standard bearers of major league baseball. Barry Bonds is a record holder. Henry Aaron is a standard bearer. The latter is far more important and valuable than the former. And it carries weight beyond the baseball diamond, where Henry always wanted respect. He spent his life being compared on the baseball diamond to Willie Mays, but Henry Aaron wanted to follow in the legacy of Jackie Robinson, to use his platform to provide opportunities for people who did not have them. Baseball was simply a

means to that end. (Photo © Erinn Hartman) Photographs from The Last Hero: A Life of Henry Aaron (Click on Thumbnails to Enlarge) Clemente, Mays, and Aaron Jacksonville, 1953 Bradenton, 1957 Aaron and Family Aaron in Atlanta Breaking Babe's Record Aaron Today --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

This biography of the African-American baseball great doesn't amount to the epic it wants to be. ESPN reporter Bryant (Juicing the Game) portrays Aaron's journey from Jim Crow Alabama to superstardom with the Milwaukee, then Atlanta Braves during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s as both a sports saga and a struggle against racism. (The Braves' spring training facilities stayed segregated into the 1960s, and Aaron's 1974 breaking of Babe Ruth's home run record was marred by racist death threats.) But while the author takes very seriously the sports commentator's traditional task of investing trivia with near-biblical portentousness "And thus it came to pass that Henry Aaron became the first black majority owner of the first BMW franchise in the country" he never quite succeeds at establishing Aaron's heroic stature. The slugger comes off as a superlatively skillful but unspectacular player whose civil rights activism is cautious and muted (though more outspoken later when he became a Braves executive). Throughout, he's a wary, reticent man given to rancor over slights, and the narrative can't help wandering toward more charismatic figures like Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson. Mightily as he swings, Bryant fails to knock Aaron's story out of the park. Photos. (May 11) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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