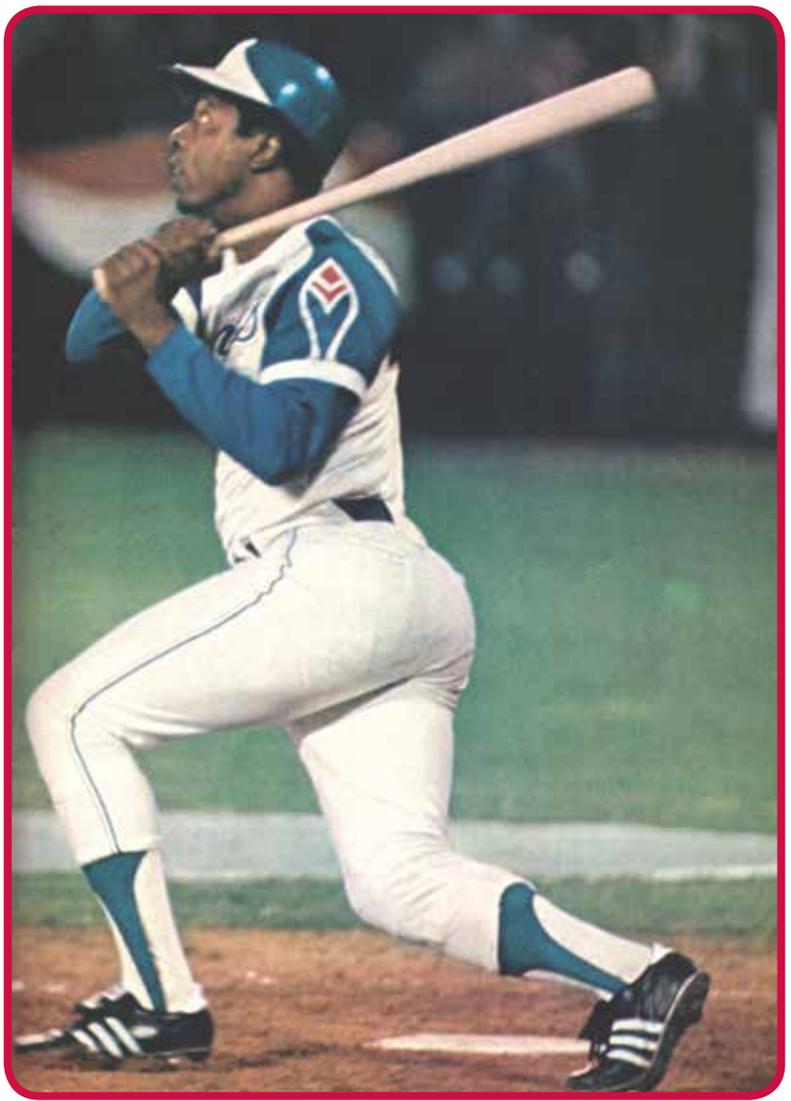


# The Swing that Rewrote HISTORY

**40 years later,  
Hank Aaron's feat  
stands the test of time**



By Adam DeCock

**T**he Braves April 8th home opener marked more than just the start of the baseball season this year. It also marked the 40th anniversary of Hank Aaron breaking Babe Ruth's long standing home run record and #715.

When Aaron stepped into the batter's box in the fourth inning in a game against the Los Angeles Dodgers on April 8, 1974, 'Hammerin' Hank' did more than break a record that had stood for nearly 40 years. The feat itself remains a marvel in baseball history, but is just one aspect of what makes Aaron's path as a player, as well as his post-playing days, a memorable journey. And it wasn't all luck.

"I'm proud of all of my accomplishments that I've had in baseball," Aaron said. "In spite of what some people may think, I did have a lot of God-given talent, but I worked very hard to accomplish what I did."

That talent and hard work wasn't always appreciated by fans of the game. Aaron's performance is remarkable in and of itself, and one could argue that his career was more impressive given social issues of the time.

Before Hank, there was George Herman Babe Ruth, an icon of baseball. His larger than life personality left an indelible impression on baseball fans near and far. The Sultan of Swat had started with

the Boston Red Sox, then spent the majority of his well-documented career with the New York Yankees. 'The Curse of the Bambino' might be the most well-known curse in baseball, having haunted the Sox for over 80 seasons following the trade that put Ruth in pinstripes.

Almost 40 years after Ruth's 714th home run, an unassuming young ballplayer from Mobile, AL entered the picture. Little did Aaron know his feat would capture his and future generations of baseball fans, and change the landscape of America's pastime forever.

Aaron ended the 1973 season with 713 home runs, one shy of the record set by Babe Ruth in 1935, a record that most considered unattainable. After the final game Aaron feared he wouldn't live to see the 1974 season.

The recipient of countless death threats in the offseason, Aaron also received a great deal of hate mail, voicing displeasure of seeing him break Ruth's record. Even reporters covering Aaron's journey received hatred from fans.

The Braves opened the 1974 season in Cincinnati. Aaron was originally going to sit out the entire series against the Reds, so the record could be broken in Atlanta. However, baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn mandated Aaron play in two of the three games.

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the plate in the 4th inning to face Al Downing, who also, ironically, wore number 44. Hank sent a 1-0 pitch to left-center field and the crowd watched as the ball sailed into the Braves bullpen, just over a leaping Bill Buckner. Relief pitcher Tom House caught the historic ball and presented it to Aaron during the celebration at home plate.

Pandemonium ensued. Cannons were fired off, celebrating the iconic moment. After rounding second base, Aaron was briefly joined by two fans while making his way to home plate, and now-famous reporter Craig Sager, who attempted to interview Aaron after rounding third base.

The group waiting at home plate included teammates, a mob of media and photographers, his wife, parents and family.

The humble nature of Aaron remains. He's proud of all he accomplished as an individual, but his most vivid memories are what he accomplished with his team, including winning the 1957 World Series.

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And while he sits comfortably in second place in home runs, there's much more to Hammerin' Hank than the slugger. The well-rounded player possessed many tools making him a great player at the plate, on the bases, and in the field.

“I'm very happy with the way, overall, my career was. I think that, if I look back, most people would say 'Hank Aaron and home runs.' Well, you know, I got 3,771 hits. I'm not bragging, but there's more to it than just home runs. I'm very proud of the fact that I was able to do more than just hit home runs.”

Aaron tied the record with his first swing of the season, setting the stage for the 1974 Atlanta Braves home opener.

53,775 fans filed into Atlanta Stadium on a Monday night for the first home game of the season. Those in attendance were hoping to witness a piece of history with Aaron slugging his way into baseball record books. They were not disappointed.

Aaron stepped to

There is definitely a lot more than home runs for Aaron's career. Let's not be shy about what he accomplished between the lines as an individual; that records and accolades list goes on for days. Aaron was a 25-time All-Star, a four-time National League home run champion and four-time NL RBI champion, a three-time Gold Glove Award winner, and a two-time NL batting champion. He is third all-time with 3,771 hits. He is members of both the 3,000 hits club and the 500 home run club, only one of four players, and has had his number retired by two organizations (Atlanta Braves and Milwaukee Brewers). Aaron was named 1957 NL MVP and received the Lou Gehrig Memorial Award in 1970, given annually to a Major League Baseball player who best exhibits the character and



integrity of Lou Gehrig, both on the field and off it.

Much like he embraces the team accomplishments as more important than individual ones, he isn't shy to recognize individuals who helped him along the way.

"One that comes to mind quite often [as a mentor] is Mickey Owen, a name that probably many people don't know. He was a catcher with the Dodgers. When I was in Puerto Rico playing winter ball, the year before I got promoted to the big leagues, [Owen] used to take me out and pitch batting practice to me for 45 or 50 minutes, just throwing balls. And the sun was so hot, it was almost 100 degrees. I stood out there and hit 10 balls to right, 10 to left, 10 to center, and all that. I would have to say he was probably more, than anybody I can think of, instrumental in helping me become the type of hitter I was, rather than just a pure slugger. He taught me how to hit all parts of the field."

With such a well-documented baseball career, fans are aware of the accomplishments and legacy of Hank Aaron on the field. But it's what he's done off the field since that continues his impressive legacy as a person.

The Hank Aaron Chasing the Dream Foundation, in a partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, gives children financial support and mentoring to pursue their dreams. The Major League Baseball Hank Aaron Chasing the Dream Program (HACDP) provides grants to Boys & Girls Club members from across the country and on military bases around the world who have shown a talent in fields such as music, dance, art, science, literature and athletics, and give them the support to develop their skills. The program provides for a perpetual endowment that annually distributes 44 grants in honor of Hank Aaron's legendary number 44.

"We have kids that play basketball, we have kids that play tennis, we have kids in drama. We have all kinds of kids. That's why it is called Chasing the Dream. Because everybody can't chase a dream by playing baseball. Some kids need to do other things. So I am proud of that, because of the fact that baseball was able to afford me the elevation that I needed in order to do that."

In addition to the Foundation, Aaron has been a commencement speaker at numerous universities.

"I can tell kids on a college level what I think and what it takes for them to be successful in life. I am proud of the fact that, the home runs are fine. I have 14 degrees that I have received from different schools around the country. Marquette [University] happens to be my latest one, and I am very proud of that, because I played ball in Milwaukee."

And for someone that bookended his Braves career in Atlanta with the Milwaukee Braves and Milwaukee Brewers, Milwaukee remains a special part of his past and present.

"When I hit the home run to break Babe Ruth's record, I had an opportunity to go to two or three other clubs. And I talked

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to Mr. Bud Selig, who was then the owner of the ball club, now of course he's the Commissioner. I talked to him and told him that if I played any more, it would be coming back to Milwaukee, because I felt that I didn't have anything to prove to anybody. I had gotten as far as I could go in baseball. If I had a bad year, or didn't do as well as I should do, Milwaukee would be one city that they

would not boo me (laughs)."

And now 40 years later, Hank Aaron is synonymous with home runs, as well as so much more. For his accomplishments on the field and off, Aaron remains humble. His team-first mentality, always thinking of others and ability to use his past to benefit others around him for their futures, Hank Aaron really was more than a home run hitter. 

