

Willie Mays, Baseball's Electrifying Player of Power and Grace, Is Dead at 93

Mays, the Say Hey Kid, was the game's exuberant embodiment of the complete player. Some say he was the greatest of them all.

By Richard Goldstein

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Willie Mays, the spirited center fielder whose brilliance at the plate, in the field and on the basepaths for the Giants led many to call him the greatest all-around player in baseball history, died on Tuesday in Palo Alto, Calif. He was 93.

Larry Baer, the president and chief executive of the Giants, said Mays, the oldest living member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, died in an assisted living facility.

Mays compiled extraordinary statistics in 22 National League seasons with the Giants in New York and San Francisco and a brief return to New York with the Mets, preceded by a time in the Negro leagues, from 1948-50. He hit 660 career home runs and had 3,293 hits and a .301 career batting average.

But he did more than personify the complete ballplayer. An exuberant style of play and an effervescent personality made Mays one of the game's, and America's, most charismatic figures, a name

that even people far afield from the baseball world recognized instantly as a national treasure.

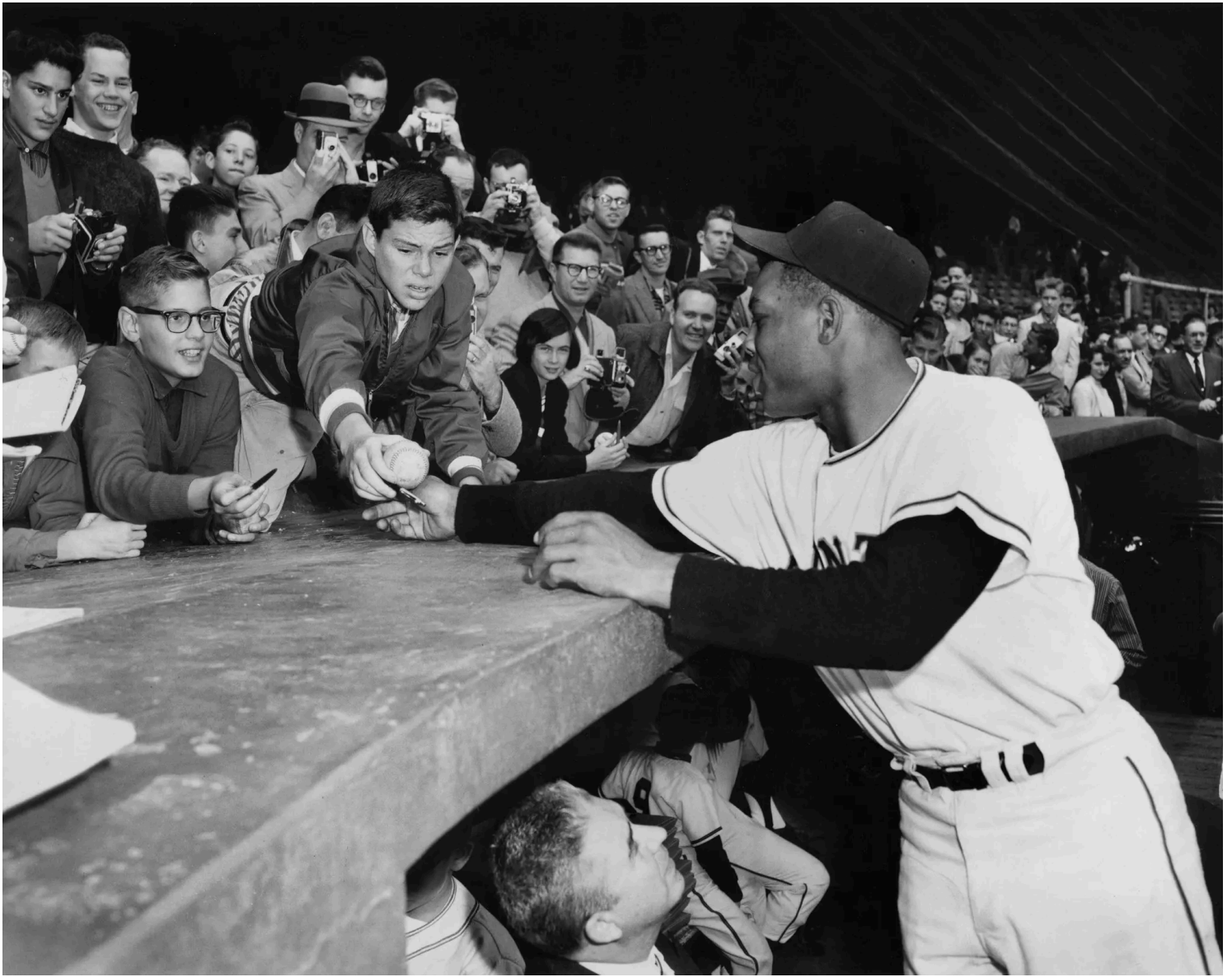
Charles M. Schulz was such a fan that Mays often came up by name in Schulz's "Peanuts" comic strip. (Asked to spell "maze" in a spelling bee, Charlie Brown ventured, "M ... A ... Y... S.") Woody Allen's alter ego in "Manhattan" ranked Mays No. 2 on his list of joys that made life worthwhile. (Groucho Marx was No. 1.) In 1954, the R&B group the Treniers recorded "Say Hey (the Willie Mays Song)."

"When I broke in, I didn't know many people by name," Mays once explained, "so I would just say, 'Say, hey,' and the writers picked that up."

Mays propelled himself into the Hall of Fame with thrilling flair, his cap flying off as he chased down a drive or ran the bases.

"He had an open manner, friendly, vivacious, irrepressible," the baseball writer Leonard Koppett said of the young Mays. "Whatever his private insecurities, he projected a feeling that playing ball, for its own sake, was the most wonderful thing in the world."

And New York embraced this son of Alabama, putting him on a pedestal with two others who ruled the city's center fields in an era when its teams dominated baseball. The Yankees had Mickey Mantle, the Brooklyn Dodgers had Duke Snider, and the Giants had No. 24, and a city not known for equanimity loved to argue about which team's slugger reigned supreme.



Mays signing autographs at the Polo Grounds on Sept. 29, 1957, the day of the Giants' last game before leaving New York for San Francisco. The New York Times

Mays captured the ardor of baseball fans at a time when Black players were still emerging in the major leagues and segregation remained untrammelled in his native South. He was revered in Black neighborhoods, especially in Harlem, where he played stickball with youngsters outside his apartment on St. Nicholas Place — not far

from the Polo Grounds, where the Giants played — and he was treated like visiting royalty at the original Red Rooster, one of Harlem’s most popular restaurants in his day.

President Barack Obama took Mays with him on his flight to the 2009 All-Star Game in St. Louis, telling him that if it hadn’t been for the changes in attitude that African-American figures like Mays and Jackie Robinson fostered, “I’m not sure that I would get elected to the White House.”

Mays and Yogi Berra, who was cited posthumously, were among 17 Americans whom Mr. Obama honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award, at a White House ceremony in November 2015.

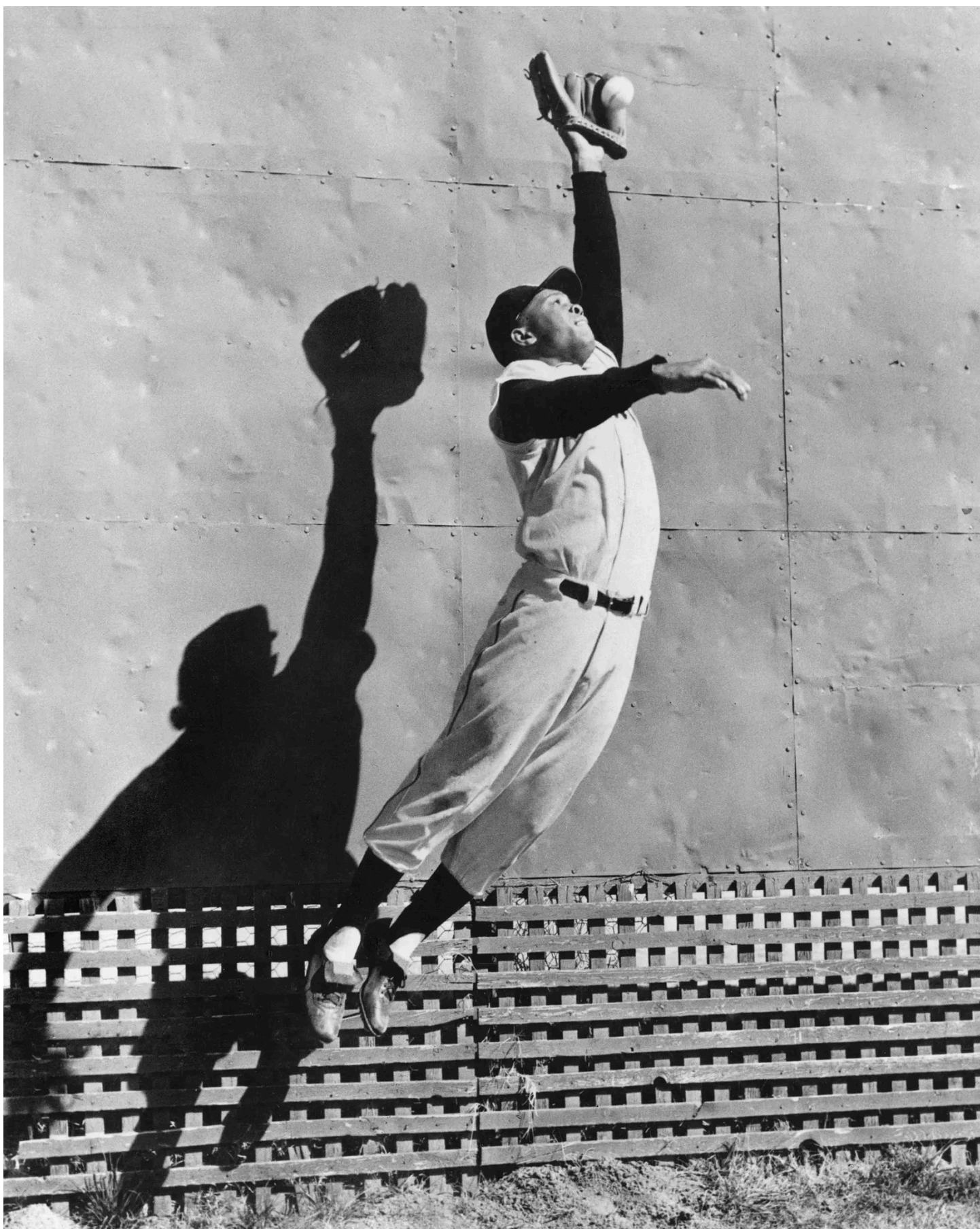
Power and Speed

Mays played center field with daring and grace, his basket catches made at the hip, his throws embodying power and precision. His over-the-shoulder snare of a drive to deepest center field in the Polo Grounds during the 1954 World Series against the Cleveland Indians (now the Guardians) — followed by a sensational throw to second base — is remembered simply as “The Catch.”

His frame seemed ordinary at first glance — 5 feet 11 inches and 180 pounds or so — but he had unusually large hands and outstanding peripheral vision that complemented his speed in running down balls. And he was all steel, his back exceptionally muscular.

Branch Rickey, the executive who helped break the modern major leagues' color barrier by signing Robinson to the Dodgers, evoked the young Mays in his book "The American Diamond" (1965), recalling him "propelling the ball in one electric flash off the Polo Grounds scoreboard on the face of the upper deck in left field for a home run."

"The ball got up there so fast, it was incredible," Rickey wrote. "Like a pistol shot, it would crash off the tin and fall to the grass below."



Mays' 7,112 putouts as an outfielder rank No. 1 in major league history. The New York Times

Mays became a hero out west as well after the Giants and the Dodgers decamped for California in 1958. Though he received a tepid reception from San Francisco fans at first, he flourished playing for them despite the high winds and cold nights at Candlestick Park. When the Giants moved to their current home, Oracle Park, in 2000, they unveiled a nine-foot-high bronze statue of Mays. The ballpark's address: 24 Willie Mays Plaza.

Mays's electrifying play, and the immensity of his talents, made statistics seem lifeless. Nonetheless, his achievements in the record books were extraordinary.

He drove in more than 100 runs in 10 different seasons and scored more than 100 runs in 12 consecutive years.

His 7,112 putouts as an outfielder rank No. 1 in major league history (he had 657 more playing first base), and he won 12 Gold Glove awards beginning in 1957, the year the honors were first bestowed.

His 660 home runs are sixth all time, behind Barry Bonds's 762, Hank Aaron's 755, Babe Ruth's 714, Albert Pujols's 703 and Alex Rodriguez's 696.

His 2,068 runs scored put him seventh on the career list, and his 1,909 runs batted in are 12th.

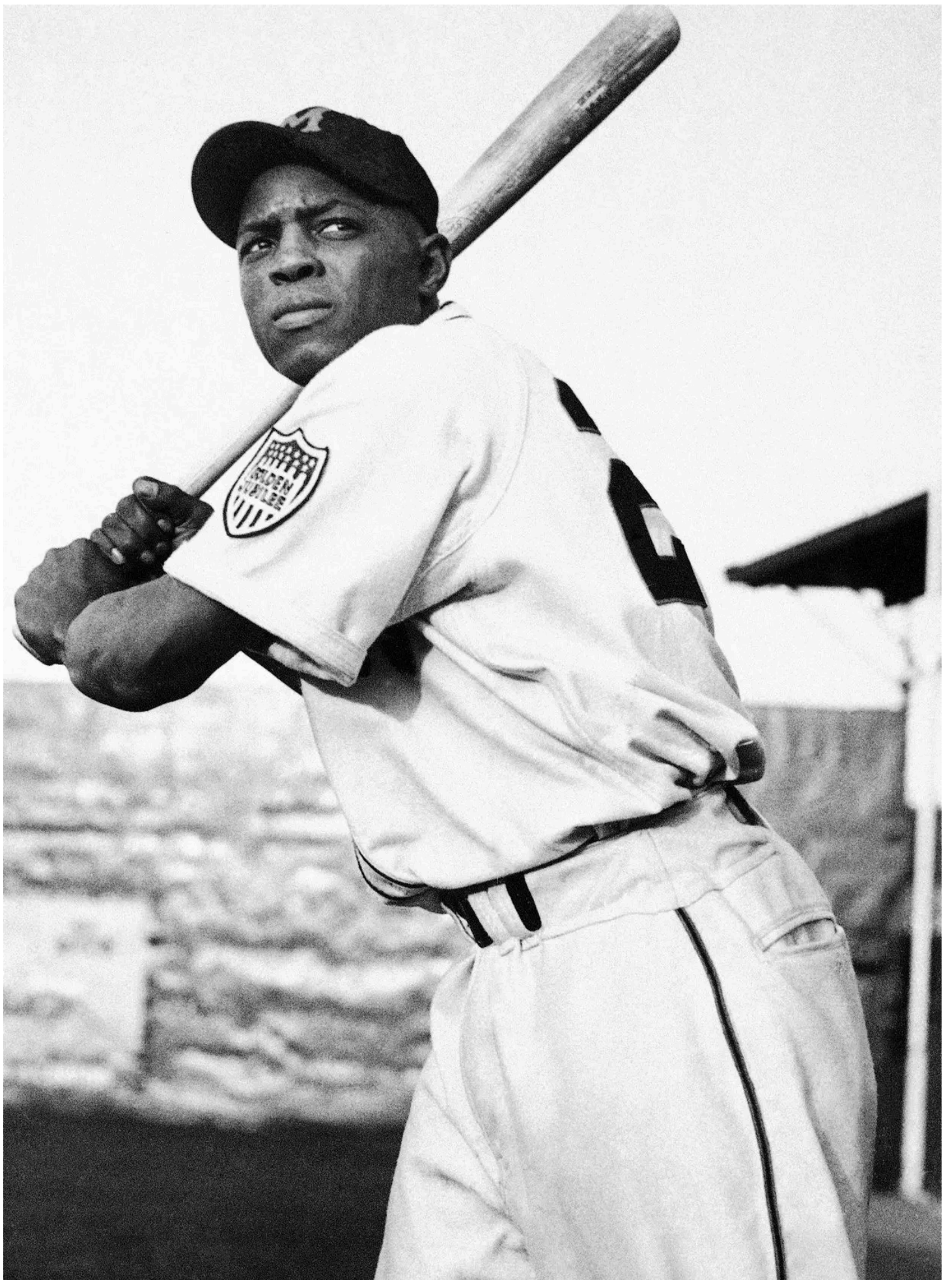
His 3,293 hits put him listed as No. 13.

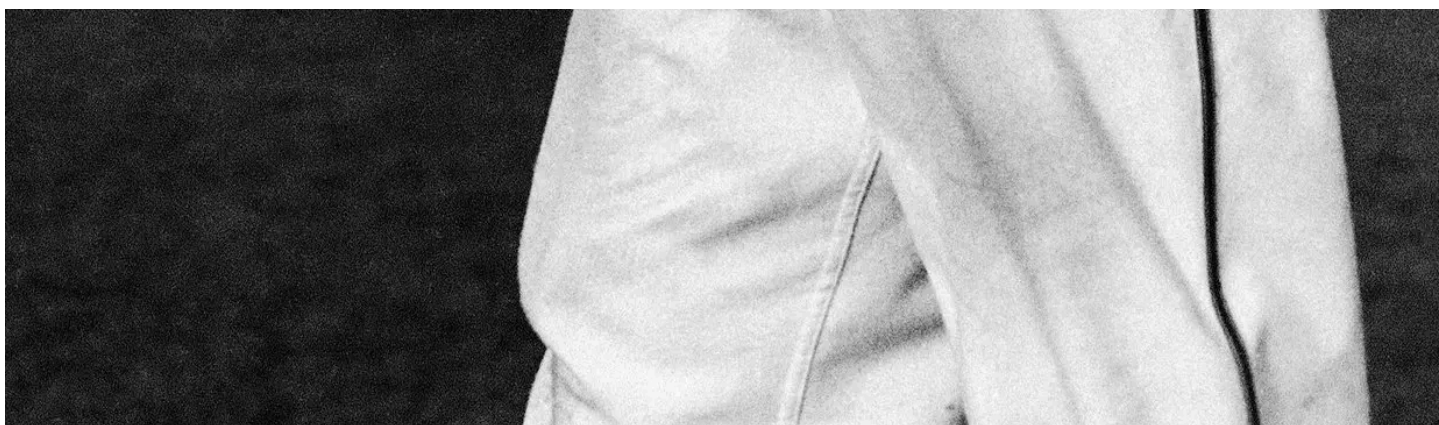
He stole 338 bases at a time when the running game was not especially favored.

And he played in 150 or more games in 13 consecutive seasons.

In December 2020, Major League Baseball announced that the seven Negro leagues that operated between 1920 and 1948 would gain major league status. In accord with that, Mays's statistical totals with the 1948 Birmingham Black Barons of the Negro American League have been added to his major league totals.

Mays was the National League rookie of the year in 1951 and was named Most Valuable Player in 1954 and 1965. He played on four pennant-winning teams (the Giants in 1951, '54 and '62 and the Mets in 1973), but only one World Series champion, the 1954 Giants, who swept Cleveland. He was selected for 24 All-Star Games and was the M.V.P. of the game in 1963 and 1968.





Mays was batting .477 for the Minneapolis Millers of the American Association when he was called up by the Giants in May 1951. TRB, via Associated Press

An Associated Press poll of athletes, writers and historians in 1999 voted Mays baseball's second-greatest figure, behind Babe Ruth.

"Willie could do everything from the day he joined the Giants," Leo Durocher, his manager during most of his years at the Polo Grounds, said when Mays was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1979, his first year of eligibility. "He never had to be taught a thing. The only other player who could do it all was Joe DiMaggio."

But even DiMaggio bowed to Mays.

"Willie Mays is the closest to being perfect I've ever seen," he said.

'You're Going to Be a Ballplayer'

Willie Howard Mays Jr. was born on May 6, 1931, in Westfield, Ala., near Birmingham. His parents were unmarried teenagers.

His father was said to have been named for President William Howard Taft at a time when Taft's Republican Party was considered more sympathetic to the needs of Black people than the Democrats.

A steelworker and later a Pullman porter, Willie Sr. was known as Cat, for his graceful play in semipro baseball.

Willie's mother, Annie Satterwhite, a former standout high school athlete in track and basketball, left the family when he was a baby and settled in Birmingham. She married there and had 10 children, but Mays kept in touch with her into his major league playing days.

His father moved with him to Fairfield, another Birmingham suburb, when Willie was still young and, with his mother's two sisters, helped raise him.

Mays became an all-around athlete at Fairfield Industrial High School, where he was taught by Angelena Rice, the mother of Condoleezza Rice, the future secretary of state. In her memoir "Extraordinary, Ordinary People" (2010), Ms. Rice wrote that Mays had remembered her mother telling him: "You're going to be a ballplayer. If you need to leave a little early for practice, you let me know."

When Mays joined the Birmingham Black Barons of the Negro American League in 1948, DiMaggio was his idol.

"When we were kids in the South, we would always pick one guy to emulate," Mays told Bob Herbert of The New York Times in 2000. "Ted Williams was the best hitter, but I picked Joe to pattern myself after because he was such a great all-around player."

(Mays's death came as Major League Baseball was paying tribute to the Negro leagues with a series of games at the ballpark where Mays began his career, the venerable Rickwood Field in Birmingham. Mays had been invited to attend but said in a statement on Monday that he wouldn't be able to make the trip. "I'd like to be there, but I don't move as well as I used to," he wrote. His death was announced to the crowd during a game.)

Mays was signed in 1950 by a New York Giants scout, Ed Montague, who spotted him while scouting another player on the Black Barons. Mays hit .353 for the Giants' Trenton team that year.

At the time, he was the only Black player in the Interstate League, and he endured taunts. In his Hall of Fame induction speech at Cooperstown, N.Y., he recalled one episode in Hagerstown, Md.

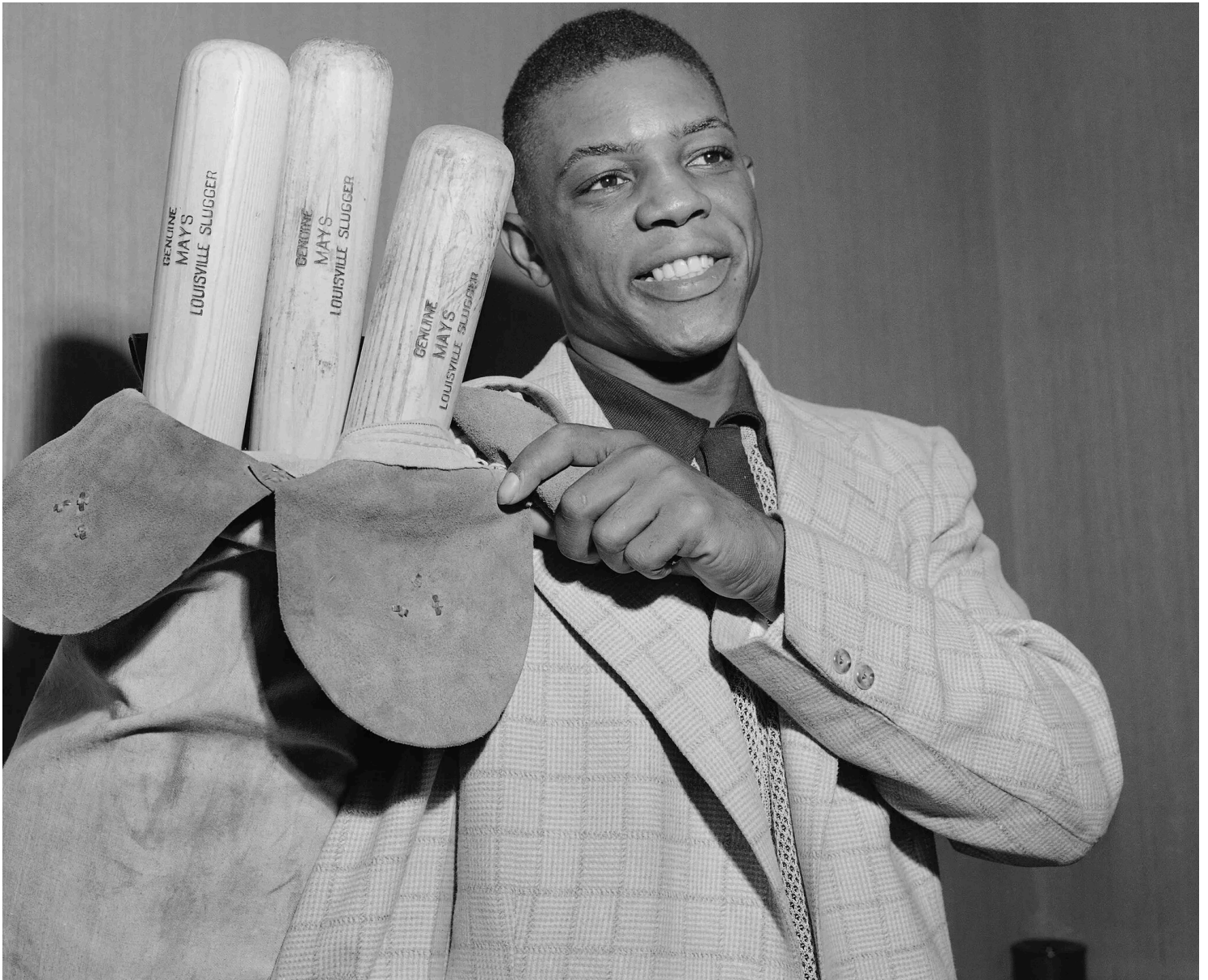
"The first night, I hit two home runs and a triple," he said. "Next night, I hit two home runs and a double. On the loudspeaker, now, they say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we know you don't like that kid playing center field, but please do not bother him again because he's killing us.'"

He continued: "I went there on a Friday, they were calling me all kinds of names. By Sunday, they were cheering. And to me, I had won them over."

Mays was batting .477 for the Minneapolis Millers of the American Association when he was called up by the Giants in May 1951. It was only four years after Robinson had become a Dodger, and there were

few Black players in the majors, although the Giants had four when Mays joined them: Monte Irvin, the star outfielder; Hank Thompson, their third baseman; Ray Noble, a backup catcher; and Artie Wilson, an infielder, who was sent to the minors to make room for Mays.

Black and white teammates remained apart early in Mays's career. "For a while we couldn't stay in the same hotels," he said. "We'd get to Chicago, we'd get off on the South Side, they'd get off on the North Side."



Mays in 1951. Harry Harris/Associated Press

Mays made his debut on May 25, 1951, going without a hit in five at-bats against the Phillies in Philadelphia. He was 0 for 12 in a three-game series before the Giants returned home. But on Monday night, May 28, at the Polo Grounds, he connected off the future Hall of Fame left-hander Warren Spahn of the Boston Braves for his first major league hit, a towering home run to left field in the first inning.

From the start, Durocher saw greatness in Mays.

“The word is magnetism,” Durocher said in his autobiography “Nice Guys Finish Last” (1975, with Ed Linn). “A personal magnetism which infects everybody around them with the feeling that this is the man who will carry them to victory.”

Rookie of the Year

But Mays struggled at the plate through the spring of 1951, and at one point he tearfully told Durocher that he couldn't hit big league pitching. Durocher told him that he was the best center fielder he had ever seen and assured him that he would remain in the lineup.

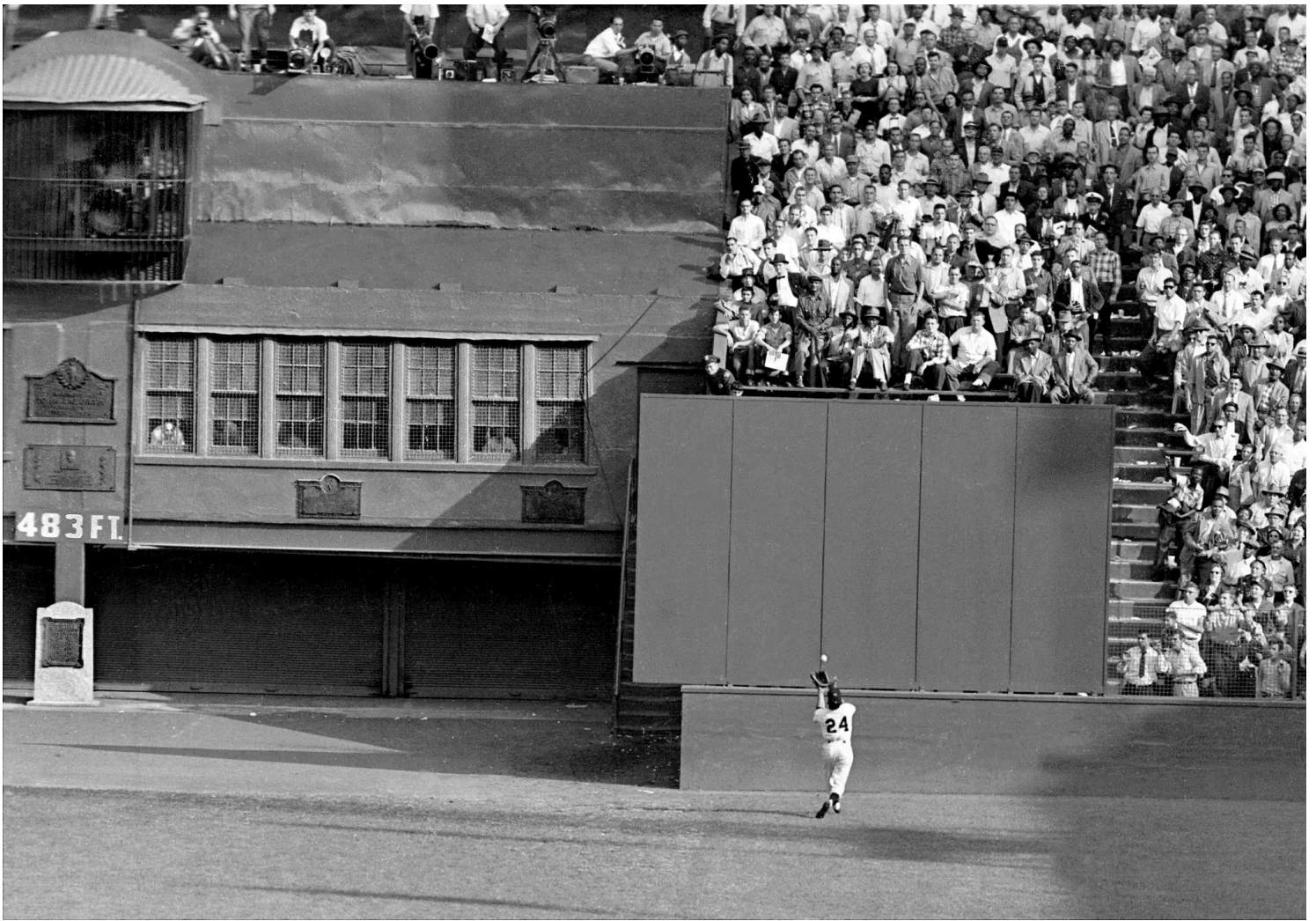
The Giants staged a storied revival that season, coming from 13½ games behind the Dodgers in mid-August to force the playoff series that they won in Game 3 on Bobby Thomson's three-run homer off Ralph Branca in the ninth inning — the “shot heard 'round the world.” Thomson's drive at the Polo Grounds came with runners on second and third and one out. When he connected, Mays was in the on-deck circle.

When the Giants faced the Yankees in the World Series, DiMaggio was playing center field for the last time, and Mantle, Mays's fellow rookie, was in right field. The Yankees won the Series in six games, but Mays was on his way to stardom. In winning the N.L. rookie of the year honors, he batted .274 and hit 20 home runs.

After playing in 34 games in the 1952 season, Mays entered the Army and played baseball at Fort Eustis, Va. But in 1954 he was back in the Giants' lineup and captured the batting title with a .345 average, hit 41 home runs and drove in 110 runs, all while leading the team to another pennant and a World Series date with the Indians, who had set an American League record by winning 111 games that year.

In the opening game, on the afternoon of Sept. 29, the score was tied 2-2 with nobody out in the eighth inning and two Cleveland players on base, Larry Doby on second and Al Rosen on first. Durocher had brought in the left-handed Don Liddle to relieve Sal Maglie, and Liddle was facing the lefty-batting Vic Wertz.

Wertz drove the first pitch just to the right of dead center field. Racing toward the high green boarding with his back to home plate, Mays caught the ball over his left shoulder some 450 feet away. He cupped it like a football player catching a pass, then whirled and fired to second base, his cap flying off. The throw, as spectacular as the catch, kept Rosen on first while Doby tagged and went to third.



Mays making “The Catch” at the Polo Grounds in Game 1 of the 1954 World Series.
New York Daily News Archive, via Getty Images

Cleveland never scored in the inning, and the little-known outfielder Dusty Rhodes hit a three-run pinch-hit homer in the 10th to give the Giants a 5-2 triumph. They went on to win the Series in four straight games.

“The Catch” was only one spectacular play by Mays. Another came at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh in his rookie season, off a deep drive hit by the Pirates’ Rocky Nelson.

Irvin, the Giants' future Hall of Fame left fielder, told of the moment in "Mays, Mantle, and Snider: A Celebration" (1987), by Donald Honig.

"Willie whirled around and took off," Irvin said. "At the last second he saw he couldn't get his glove across his body in time to make the catch, so he caught it in his bare hand. Leo was flabbergasted. We all were. Nobody had ever seen anything like it."

Mays hit 51 home runs in 1955, Durocher's last season as the Giants' manager. In 1956, playing under Bill Rigney, Mays led the league in stolen bases with 40, the first of his four consecutive stolen-base titles.



Mays stealing third base during the first inning of the 1960 All-Star game at Yankee Stadium. The New York Times

Despite Mays's heroics, the Giants were a fading team by then, and after the 1957 season they moved to San Francisco as the Dodgers went to Los Angeles.

In his first year in San Francisco, Mays batted .347 with 29 home runs, having been asked by Rigney, his manager, to hit for average rather than go for homers. Moreover, the shallow center field at Seals Stadium kept Mays from turning the kind of spectacular plays he had fashioned at the cavernous Polo Grounds. Giants fans voted Orlando Cepeda, the slugging rookie first baseman, the team's most valuable player.

A Black Family Moved In

Mays even had trouble purchasing a home in a fashionable San Francisco neighborhood, when neighbors complained that property values would decline if a Black family moved in. The San Francisco Chronicle ran a front-page article on the issue, and Mayor George Christopher offered to let Mays and his wife live at his home temporarily if they continued to be rebuffed. With the city facing embarrassment, the owner of the home finally went ahead with the deal.



Mays, left, signing the papers that concluded the contentious purchase of a home in San Francisco. Looking on are his wife, Margherite; Walter A. Gnesdiloff, who sold the home; and Terry A. Francois, right, Mays's lawyer. Associate Press

After two years at Seals Stadium, the Giants moved to the newly built and ever windy Candlestick Park. Mays found that he had to spread hot oil on his body to combat the wind chill. Those winds kept many a drive in the park.

“Playing in Candlestick cost me 10, 12 homers a year,” Mays once said. “I’ve always thought it cost me the opportunity to break Babe Ruth’s record.”

But Mays thrived in San Francisco. In 1959, he began eight straight seasons in which he drove in at least 100 runs. On April 30, 1961, he hit four home runs against the Braves at Milwaukee’s County Stadium. The following June 29, he hit three in a game at Philadelphia.

On July 24, Mays returned to play in New York for the first time since the Giants had moved to San Francisco, in an exhibition game at Yankee Stadium. A crowd of some 50,000 reserved its biggest cheers for Mays.

The Giants were regaining their New York swagger. In 1962, with Mays slugging 49 home runs, they won the pennant in a three-game playoff against the Dodgers, then lost to the Yankees in seven games in the World Series.

Mays hit 52 home runs in 1965, joining Ruth, Jimmie Foxx, Ralph Kiner and Mantle as the only players at that time to have hit at least 50 in a single season more than once. On May 4, 1966, Mays surpassed the National League record for home runs, 511, set by the former Giant outfielder and manager Mel Ott.

As he approached age 40, Mays was still capable of outstanding play, but he had changed.

“Willie, as he grew older, became more withdrawn and suspicious, more cautious, more vulnerable and with plenty of reason,” Leonard Koppett wrote in “A Thinking Man’s Guide to Baseball” (1967). “Life, both personally and professionally, became more complicated for him, and he had his share of sorrow.” After marrying and adopting a child, Mays “went through a painful divorce,” Koppett wrote.

On May 11, 1972, with the Giants’ attendance in decline, Horace Stoneham, the team’s longtime owner, wanting to provide Mays with longtime financial security, sent him to the Mets in a trade for a minor league pitcher, Charlie Williams.

Mays was in the next to last year of a two-year contract paying him \$165,000 a season (the equivalent of a about \$1.25 million today). When the deal was made, Joan Payson, the Mets’ president, who had been a stockholder in the New York Giants and was a fan of Mays, guaranteed him a 10-year, \$50,000 annual payment apart from his baseball salary. He was to be a good-will ambassador and part-time instructor after his playing days ended.

Mays was hitting .167 when he joined the Mets, but on May 14, in his first game with them, before a Sunday crowd of some 35,000 at Shea Stadium, he beat the Giants with a home run. Yet he was 41, and his skills had eroded. The next year he was hampered by swollen knees, an inflamed shoulder and bruised ribs, and on Sept. 20, 1973, he announced his retirement.

A Ground-Out, and It's Over

Mays was honored at Shea five days later, but there was still a finale in the spotlight. The Mets won the pennant, and Mays played in the World Series against the Oakland A's. His last appearance was in Game 3, when he grounded to shortstop as a pinch-hitter for the relief pitcher Tug McGraw.



The last hit of Mays's career, driving in a 12th-inning run for the Mets with a single against Oakland in Game 2 of the 1973 Series. Associated Press

But what was envisioned as a long-term association with the Mets soured. Mays had little interest in instructional or promotional work. “Not playing was eating me up,” he said. “I couldn’t watch the games.”

Mays’s ties to the Mets ended in October 1979, after he signed a 10-year deal at an annual salary of \$100,000 to represent Bally, the Atlantic City hotel and casino company. Bowie Kuhn, the baseball commissioner, told Mays that he could not hold a job with a company that promoted gambling and also retain a salaried position in baseball. Mays decided to keep the Bally job and forgo the remainder of his \$50,000 yearly payments from the Mets, which were to have continued through 1981. Kuhn suspended him from baseball.

Kuhn imposed a similar ban on Mantle in 1983 when he took a post with the Claridge casino and hotel in Atlantic City. But in March 1985, Peter Ueberroth, Kuhn’s successor, revoked both bans, and Mays continued to work for Bally while becoming a part-time hitting coach for the Giants. In the late 1980s, the Giants gave Mays a lifetime contract as a front-office consultant.

He remained the Say Hey Kid, his vanity license plates proclaiming “Say Hey.”



Mays in 2010. Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

In 2004, the Giants star Barry Bonds tied Mays's career home run mark of 660 on April 12 at San Francisco against the Milwaukee Brewers. Bonds was Mays's godson and the son of his former

teammate Bobby Bonds. Mays met Barry Bonds near the Giants' dugout and presented him with a torch he had received when he jogged a leg in the 2002 Olympic torch run. It was embellished with diamonds forming the numbers 660 and 661.

When the Mets held an old-timers' event at CitiField in August, 2022, they retired Mays's No. 24 jersey number and presented a tribute video to him along with a message from Mays, who could not attend, having undergone a hip replacement a few months earlier. Joan Payson, who wanted Mays to finish his career in New York City, had promised that the Mets would retire his number. But when she died in 1975, the promise had been unfulfilled.

Mays, who lived in Atherton, Calif., before moving to Palo Alto, is survived by his son, Michael, from his first marriage, to Margherite Chapman, which ended in divorce. His second wife, Mae Louise (Allen) Mays, with whom he had no children, died in 2013.

When the San Francisco Giants won the 1962 National League pennant, Mays was in the lead car of their victory parade. He also rode in the Giants' parades following their 2010, 2012 and 2014 World Series victories and accompanied the players to White House receptions hosted by President Obama after each of those victories. At his death, he was listed by the Giants as a special assistant to the president and chief executive.

The 'Best'

Mays largely stayed away from controversy and seldom spoke about racial issues, although he went on the radio in 1966 to help quell a riot in San Francisco after a Black teenager had been shot by a white police officer. During the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, Jackie Robinson criticized him for not drawing on his stature to confront the issues of the day. In the spring of 1968, Mays called a news conference to respond.

“People do things in different ways,” he was quoted as saying by James S. Hirsch in “Willie Mays: The Life, the Legend” (2010). “I can’t, for instance, go out and picket. I can’t stand on a soapbox and preach. I believe understanding is the important thing. In my talks to kids, I’ve tried to get that message across. It makes no difference whether you are Black or white because we are all God’s children fighting for the same cause.”



Mays waving to a San Francisco crowd in 2021 as the Giants honored him on the day after his 90th birthday. D. Ross Cameron/Associated Press

Mays evoked the image of a “natural,” a superb athlete who needed to do little to hone his skills. But that was not the case.

“I studied the pitchers,” Mays told the baseball writer Roger Kahn in “Memories of Summer.” (2004). “I knew what every single pitcher’s best pitch was. You wonder why? Because in a tight spot, with the game on the line, what’s the pitcher going to throw? His best pitch. Curve, slider, fastball, whatever. His best pitch. Because I’d studied and memorized that, I’d be ready.”

When he was selected for the Hall of Fame, Mays was asked to name the best ballplayer he had ever seen.

“I think I was the best ballplayer I’ve ever seen,” he replied. “I feel nobody in the world could do what I could do on a baseball field.”

A correction was made on June 21, 2024: Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misstated the name of the San Francisco Giants’ current home ballpark. It is Oracle Park, not AT&T Park. (The name was changed from AT&T to Oracle in 2019.) The error also appeared earlier in a correction regarding when the current ballpark opened. It opened in 2000, not 2001.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)