Hank Aaron

"Carries No Politician's Grin; No Uncle Tom's Handkerchief..."

No. 44 (Hank Aaron) Takes A Record-Busting Home Run Swing On His Way To Baseball Stardom

By Sam Lacy
AFRO-AMERICAN Newspapers Sports Editor

In the wild literary safari by journalists hunting for new words to describe Hank Aaron and his electrifying pursuit of the all-time homerun record of Babe Ruth, one very important thing has been overlooked.

The scores of newcomers to the sports scene since the Atlanta Braves star began his climb to fame in the mid-fifties, know next to nothing of Henry Aaron, gentleman-athlete. Or athlete-gentleman, if you prefer.

But the johnny-come-latelies are not to be criticized for this; it is a normal reaction to such a feat as Aaron is performing.

No matter the oldtimers who hold the Babe as sacred, and who try to protect his record by pointing to Hank's advantages in scheduling, number of games, number of at-bats, etc., these modern Runyons see only that Hank seems a virtual cinch to eclipse the mark.

"Other Side" Overlooked

They recognize the fact that Aaron is closing in on Ruth's mark in more impressive style than it was set, especially when the waning years of the two are compared.

Hank hit 47 homers when he was 37 years old; the Babe had 41 when he was 37. Both hit 34 when they were 38, but Aaron — as of this writing — has hit 37 circuits, with 14 games to play.

When he was at the corresponding age of 39, Ruth hit only 22 homers in the entire season.

It is understandable, therefore, that the "other" writers of today have overlooked the "other side" of their favorite subject.

Hank Aaron is a complete gentleman.

This reporter met him 20 years ago, when he reported for a look to the Braves' training camp in Bradenton (Fla.) in the spring of 1953.

After a year of infielding at Eau Claire (Wisc.) in the Northern League, he was sent to Jacksonville (Fla.), the Braves' Sally League farm club.

He played shortstop at Eau Claire because that had been his position at the time he was bought from the Indianapolis Clowns. Dispatched to Jacksonville, he was switched to second base, then to the outfield when he was called up to the Braves — then located in Milwaukee — in 1954.

'A Star' From The Beginning

That Hank possessed the even temper of a potential star became evident when he willingly undertook to play three different positions in as many years.

Except for the last three weeks of that first summer (1954), when he was sidelined by a broken right ankle, Aaron has never held anything but starring status.

When he was destined to become the first black in the Sally League, a hotbed of racism, Aaron accepted his pioneer's role without a whimper.

And when the Braves were moved from Milwaukee to Atlanta — in major league baseball's invasion of Georgia — there was but a ripple of complaint from him. That was based on his dislike for having to abandon the new home he had built for his family in what he referred to as "a garden spot" in rural Wisconsin.

There have been numerous incidents to irritate him during his career as a black interloper, but Aaron has handled each with admirable aplomb.

Even the early-summer hurrah about racist threats and hate mail that were directed at him, was not the doing of the Atlanta slugger.

"It would not have been a public matter," Hank declared recently, "had it not been that I was asked the casual question: how were the fans taking my charge at Ruth.

"I said there had been some isolated abuse but nothing that I was worried about. It mushroomed from there."

'A Warm, Human Person'

"Mushroomed" is an apt description. A little prying by newsmen uncovered the fact that Aaron's mail — always extremely heavy — had grown in volume during May and June, and that between 18 and 20 per cent of it had suddenly become annoying — running the gamut from chiding to blaspheming.

"It amazed me how calmly he took it," says Carla Koplin, a typical southern belle with a bewitching smile and an accent

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