

WILLIE MAYS COMES HOME

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

How does the fading superstar really feel, finding himself back in the city where his legend began, on a team that reflects all the changes that have come to baseball in the last two decades?

Andrea: "Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero."

Galileo: No, Andrea. "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero."
—Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo*

On May 28, 1951, a 20-year-old centerfielder from Fairfield, Alabama, came to bat for the first time in the Polo Grounds as a New York Giant. Despite his advance notices—he'd been hitting .477 for the Minneapolis Millers when the Giants called him up—he'd gone hitless on his first road trip. Now, stepping in to face Boston Brave pitching star Warren Spahn, he was playing before a skeptically eager home crowd. The rookie swung and drove a home run into the leftfield stands for his first major-league hit.

Twenty-one years, 646 home runs, and \$2 million later, Willie Mays stepped up to the plate at Shea Stadium on May 14, 1972, in his first game as a New York Met, against his lifelong teammates, the San Francisco Giants. It was a 4-4

game; Mays had walked earlier, so this was still his first official at bat as a Met. There were 40,000 people at Shea, who had cheered Mays with a fervor nearing desperation when he was introduced. Now, as he stood at the plate with his old number 24 on the back of a new uniform, there were 40,000 people who wanted it to happen, who were trying by a collective act of will to make it happen, just this once. And Mays swung, and drove the ball out of the park for the home run that won the game, 5-4, and beyond the cheering and screaming at Shea, there was a sense of celebration and good cheer that day and the next and perhaps the next.

It went far beyond the winning of one game or the return of one hero named Willie Howard Mays, age 41. New York's celebration was closer to the explosion of joy that surrounded the Mets' winning of the World Series in 1969. And like that instant holiday, with confetti in the streets and spontaneous motorcades,

we New Yorkers, myself among them, cheered Mays because we as a city needed him, in a way we never needed him when he arrived in the spring of 1951.

Columnist Pete Hamill, a confessed "New York chauvinist," wrote of Mays' home run as "a large gesture of repair, some peculiar sign that we might be able to erase what happened, eliminate the sense of cynicism that flooded the city in 1958 when the Giants and Dodgers left for the West. It was as if some forgotten promise had been kept. . . ."

It was this and more; for in understanding what Willie Mays means, we must remember what New York was and what it has become, so that his act of coming home and coming through could mean so much to so many.

When Willie Mays came to New York in 1951, three Essential

He may not be the athlete he once was, but his all-out style of play, seen here on a dive back into first, still remains.

WILLIE MAYS

CONTINUED

Truths governed the city: *First*, New York was the center of the universe, the power source of ideas, tastes, money, trends, life itself. It was the city about which they still made those movies, those M-G-M lush color extravaganzas, with the three-sailors-with-24-hour-passes-running-through-Central-Park-tap-dancing-on-the-Statue-of-Liberty-necking-on-a-subway plots, the sound track a cacaphony of blaring horns and furious tempos, underlining the urgent, joyous pace of The Big Apple.

Second, baseball was the sport, the unquestioned National Pastime, to be followed religiously from April through the World Series, chewed over in the bleak months of winter, until the snow turned to slush in the gutters and dispatches from the training camps in Florida signaled that life had begun again. Pro football? That was something they had to give away tickets for; college football was the opium of people whose names were on plaques and who read the front page of Jock Whitney's *Herald-Tribune*.

Third, New York was the capital of baseball. Not just the only city with three baseball teams, but three teams constantly fighting for the championship. From Mays' rookie year until the Giants and Dodgers fled to California, a New York team was in the World Series every one of those seven years; five times *both* teams were from New York, the Giants or Dodgers fighting each other for the right to challenge the invincible Yankees. The fans went from the castle on the Western border of the Bronx across the Harlem River to the Polo Grounds, or out to Flatbush Avenue to Ebbets Field, knowing that whoever won, the realm of baseball supremacy was securely within the realm bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the Hudson River and the Westchester County line.

Into this city which exuded confidence in itself and a passionate love of great baseball, Willie Mays came like a conqueror, a physical embodiment of New York's own exultant power and drive. He was all the unbridled strength of youth, touched with that unconscious arrogance of one who is great by instinct.

There are numbers which coldly reflect Willie Mays' stature as a baseball player: 3200 hits, 650 home runs, 1870 runs batted in, a lifetime batting average over .300, a slugging average close to .500, a place on every All-Star team since 1954, all 23 of them.

The numbers, however, cannot reflect the things that become instant legends, the stuff of long, lazy conversations in a neighborhood bar or at a family dinner. He seemed in his first years an amulet, a charm whose presence meant victory and whose absence harkened defeat. His first year he was part of the Miracle of Coogan's Bluff, as the Giants erased Brooklyn's August lead of 13 games, then won the pennant with Bobby Thomson's ninth inning, one-out three-run homer off Ralph Branca. (Mays was on-deck when Thomson hit his drive, a symbol of his readiness to enter the world of sports legend.) He was in the Army in 1952 and 1953, and the Giants faltered; he returned in 1954 and they won their first World Series in a generation, with Mays as the National League's Most Valuable Player.

Nor can statistics capture an athlete's style, his capacity to rise to greatness when the moment demands it. Mays' first home run in the Polo Grounds his first time at the plate; his first Met home run; these are examples. So are the two greatest plays he ever made, known to sportswriters as The Throw and The Catch.

The Throw: It is August 15, 1951, and the Giants have won four straight in their pursuit of the Dodgers. Now, as the rivals face each other, it is 1-1 in the eighth inning, with Billy Cox on third base, Ralph Branca on first, one out, and Carl Furillo at the plate, Mays shading Furillo in left-center. Furillo hits a shot to right-center; as Mays races for the ball, Cox waits on third, to score on a hit or tag on a catch. Mays reaches the ball on the dead run. Cox tags. Mays slams his left foot into the ground, pivots completely around, hurls the ball like a discus thrower right into Wes Westrum's glove on the fly, and Cox is out at the plate.

The Catch: September 29, 1954, the first game of the Giant-Cleveland Indians World Series at the Polo Grounds. The score 2-2, none out in the top of the eighth, Indians on first and second, and Vic Wertz at the plate. Connecting on a high curve, Wertz hits the ball to the deepest part of dead centerfield, heading 450 feet away, a home run almost anywhere else. Mays wheels, puts his head down and runs. And runs and runs until he catches up with the ball, catching it with his back to the plate, over his shoulder in a basket catch, much as a split end might haul in a touchdown bomb. Then he spins, cap flying off, and throws so hard and far that the man on first could not even tag to second.

These two plays are enshrined in the Mays legend. There are hundreds of others, remembered by fans and those who played with and against him.

"I remember Mays' first year, my last in the majors, with Cincinnati," recalls Bob Scheffing, now the Mets' general manager. "Kluszewski hit a line drive and Mays misjudged it. He had his glove out to make a basket catch, and as the ball flew by, he just reached out his bare hand and grabbed it." He shakes his head. "I don't know if Mays was the greatest (*Continued on page 91*)

As the Mets became plagued with injuries Mays returned to the lineup, driving himself on tired legs without complaint.

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player who ever lived, because there were many great ones. But I'll tell you this—he was certainly the most exciting player who ever lived."

Then a lot of things started to turn sour; the comfortable traditions collapsed, the assumptions unraveled. In 1957, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants announced The Great Betrayal, following and reinforcing the flight westward for sunshine and gold; and the President of the National League, asked how the league could last without New York, replied, "Who needs New York?" And, it seemed, much of America and increasing numbers of New Yorkers were asking themselves the same question.

Its streets seemed less mysterious and more dangerous, its size less a challenge to talent and hope than simply oppressive, its sense of self-confidence and boisterous spirit drained; its ornate glitter began to look tarnished, as might a bejeweled potentate struck down by some disease which corroded him inside. Television and a fear of crime and the

flight to the suburbs all helped kill the nightlife which was the electric current of New York, through which flowed rumors, conspiracies, whispers of delicious scandals and great deeds.

And then, like a lover scorned, New York seemed to turn on baseball itself. New York, after all, had always assumed that its passions became America's obsessions, flowing outward from the Media Machine of radio, television, books and magazines clustered through midtown Manhattan. If the big city was no longer to dominate baseball, it would find other passions. It is more than coincidence that in 1958, the first year without the Giants and Dodgers, New York discovered the New York Football Giants and its unsung defensive unit led by Sam Huff, Andy Robustelli, Roosevelt Grier and Dick Modzelewski, and made the intricacies of football strategy a national fascination. It was in this year, more than any other, that professional football began its climb to national pre-eminence that helped to threaten baseball—the sport that betrayed New York—as our principal national pastime.

Yet all through the next decade and a half, Willie Mays remained something special to New York. On July 24, 1961, Mays and the San Francisco Giants came home to New York for an exhibition game against the Yankees; 50,000 fans waited through an hour of rain, and when they read off Mays' name that was it for the lineups. Then when the Mets were born, Mays came back with regularity; and New York was there.

"Mays never was to San Francisco what he was to New York," says Dick Young, the New York *Daily News*' veteran sportswriter. "When the Giants and Dodgers moved to California, the San Francisco fans saw Mays as *of* New York. And like any great city, they resent being followers. So they made a hero out of Orlando Cepeda, who they saw as one of their own. I think Mays himself always felt closer to New York. Whenever the Giants came back, the banners were always there for Mays. Even for Koufax and Drysdale, it was never the same as with Mays. After a while, Willie was the last survivor from the New York days on either team; in a way, New York always



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wanted him to come home, but they'd about given up on that."

One person, however, had never given up the dream: Mrs. Joan Payson, owner of the Mets and a baseball fan of the first order. The 21 years since Willie Mays came to baseball have stripped away many illusions. We know that ballplayers are men, not gods, with their full share of lust, envy, avarice and other human shortcomings. We know that Babe Ruth was fined \$5000 not because he missed a game tending to a boy's sick dog as the movie about him told us, but because he was afflicted by an unpleasant consequence of dalliance. We know that baseball owners will abandon a city and half a century of tradition for a decimal point of profit. Mrs. Payson, however, is an aristocrat blessed with a sense of grace and fitness alien to the world of cost accountants. She did not "need" Mays to hype attendance; by 1972 her team was well on the way to its fourth straight two million home gate. But she knew that Mays belonged in New York; and she got him.

Willie Mays' return was, according to the Mets' Tom Seaver, due to "an owner's love of an individual ballplayer . . . a wish to take care of him, in a sense, for what he's done for the game." "We've been interested in Mays ever since we had a franchise," says general manager Scheffing. "But we also felt he could help us; perhaps play two or three games a week. But with all the injuries we've had this spring and summer, Mays has practically been a regular."

And is Mays glad to be back? To a stranger, Mays reveals little. He has been burned too many times by the press, answered questions too often which have come out in print different from the way they sounded in a casual chat. Yes, he's glad to be in New York. "If I had to go anyplace, it was good it was New York."

Yes, he likes New York fans. "They know a lot about the game."

Are the fans special in New York? "The way you ask that question—I'm not going to knock anybody."

Yes, he wants to stay with the Mets when his playing days are over. "I hope to. It's not up to me. It's up to them." (According to Scheffing, Mays' contract guarantees him a place with the Mets when he is no longer an active player).

From those around him, a stronger picture of Mays-as-Met emerges, of an

athlete determined to marshal the skills he has left.

"On the first trip back to San Francisco, Willie was supposed to play only on Sunday," one writer recalls. "Mays went to Berra and asked to be put in the lineup Friday night. And, of course, he hit a home run that won the game."

"I think Willie always liked New York," says a teammate. "He always liked the people, and I think there was a sense that New York fans appreciated his talents more than people in San Francisco ever did. You see, New York is . . . it's not a more sophisticated sports town, really, but it's a lot more knowledgeable about its sport. You can't fool the fans about effort. You can be hitting .100, and if you're trying, they'll love you. But if you're jaking, they'll let you know. Well, Mays is a New Yorker's kind of ballplayer. Of course he's not 26 any more, you've got to be realistic. But he's still amazing at 41. He's 100 percent effort."

"When Willie first arrived in New York," an observer remembers, "the press was asking him when he'd play, what he thought he could do for the team, and he kept explaining how he had to see what kind of shape he was in, how his legs were . . . it was like a kid that knows he has to go to the dentist and was trying to put it off as long as he can. And, of course, that first home run, it was almost absurd it was so perfect."

Romance, of course, has its limits. Willie Mays is not a 20-year-old kid; there is no more "say-hey!" exclamation, no more rooming house in Harlem, no more stickball with a gang of kids on St. Nicholas Place, none of the near-servility that marked the early Mays. (He used to call Giant manager Leo Durocher "Mr. Leo," a phrase that seemed vaguely out of place even then and which would be unthinkable for a black athlete today.) In 1954, fresh out of the Army, Mays explained that "you shouldn't fight about how much you gonna get. You love the game and practice it and play it good and you don't have to worry. The money, it'll come. . . . It's just [Giant owner] Mr. Stoneham who signs me. We never argue about how much I'm gonna get. Whatever he says is all right with me, because he's my friend." Today, no established ballplayer signs a contract blindly with "my friend, the owner," and Mays' own move to New

York was carefully supervised by lawyers and taxmen.

Yet in one critical sense, Mays remains what he was in 1951, when SPORT's editor then, Ed Fitzgerald, described him as a player who "does everything the hard way." He is at the ballpark long before other players these days, shedding his tailored suits and color-coordinated shirts, ties and shoes for a towel and a place on the rubbing table, keeping his still superb physical machine ready, horsing around with players and clubhouse men. In the dark days of early summer, with the entire Mets power unit sidelined by injuries, Mays was good enough to come off the bench and play almost every day, strong enough to supply the winning hit in five games, involved enough to hit two singles, a triple and a just-foul home run shot in one game against Montreal. He remains, in the phrase of all-star reliever Tug McGraw, "the essence of the athletic spirit. . . . A fan can't ask more from a player than what Willie Mays has given baseball."

And yet, precisely because the world and New York and baseball have all changed so much, we are asking one thing more of Willie Mays. We are asking him to give life to New York, and let the city give life to him, although in a way very different from that first love affair 21 years ago. In those days, Mays gave to New York a reflection of its own sense of power, confidence and style. He performed feats of physical excellence with the boundless confidence of youth, and they became legend in a metropolis whose abrasiveness surrounds a well-spring of unabashed sentimentality. In return, New York gave wealth and fame to a black, high school dropout from a small town in Alabama.

Now he is back, his wealth and fame long-since secure, finding at the end of his career a kind of sanctuary, a certainty that his greatest deeds and his glories yet to come will be treasured by the people in whose presence he once performed and performs still. Mays knows that we New York fans will not forget. And in turn, Willie Mays is reminding New York of our own best moments, and our own best hopes. He is there to convince us that it was not a dream, that time when New York was secure in its own vitality. The city is an unhappy land that needs a hero—but we are less unhappy now that Willie Mays is back where he belongs. ■