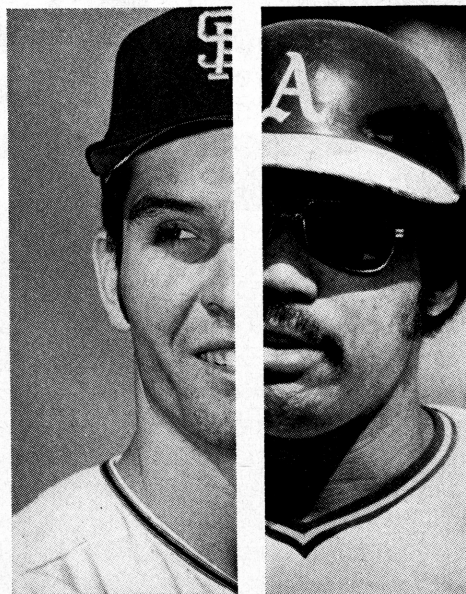


# THE MAN WHO'S GOING TO BREAK HENRY AARON'S RECORD

BY JEFF GREENFIELD



**F**rom Babe Ruth to Willie Stargell, the home-run hitter has been an outsized man, with enormous arms, shoulders, chest and neck. He was awesome not only because he hit homeruns, but because he hit them beyond the range of mortals.

Henry Aaron has altered the concept of the slugger. His achievement is consistency, endurance, and a measure of luck; he is the accountant who conquers the explosive, mercurial self-made millionaire by simply hanging in there longer. He has shown that the record of a Goliath can fall to a David who never hit 50 home runs in a season, and who never hit the kind of homer they mark with an "X" to show how far a ball can go. And he did it in an era of night baseball, coast-to-coast competition, jet lag, television and nuclear testing.

Aaron's triumph has created one of those baseball arguments that once made school recesses and bar-rooms centers of passion. In this

case, the question is: What kind of hitter stands the best chance of challenging Aaron's new record—the slugger or the stroker? More specifically, which slugger? Or which stroker?

What will the man to challenge Aaron need? Is there anyone now on the baseball scene who has enough of these qualities to count as a contender?

*First, he must get into the major leagues young.* Both Ruth and Aaron were playing major league baseball at 20. In the case of Ruth, this meant that, despite his four years as a pitcher, he was still a young man when he turned his full attention to hitting. In the case of almost every great hitter, coming up young means a chance to unlearn bad habits and become accustomed to big-league pitching while the body is at its peak.

*Second, he must escape military service.* This factor is the single biggest reason why Aaron's new record may be jeopardized. Through

the luck of timing, neither Ruth nor Aaron had to serve in the military. Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio each missed three seasons; Willie Mays, with 660 career homeruns, lost almost two full seasons. With the draft now ended, a young ballplayer can count on two or three years in his physical prime that once might have been carved out of his career.

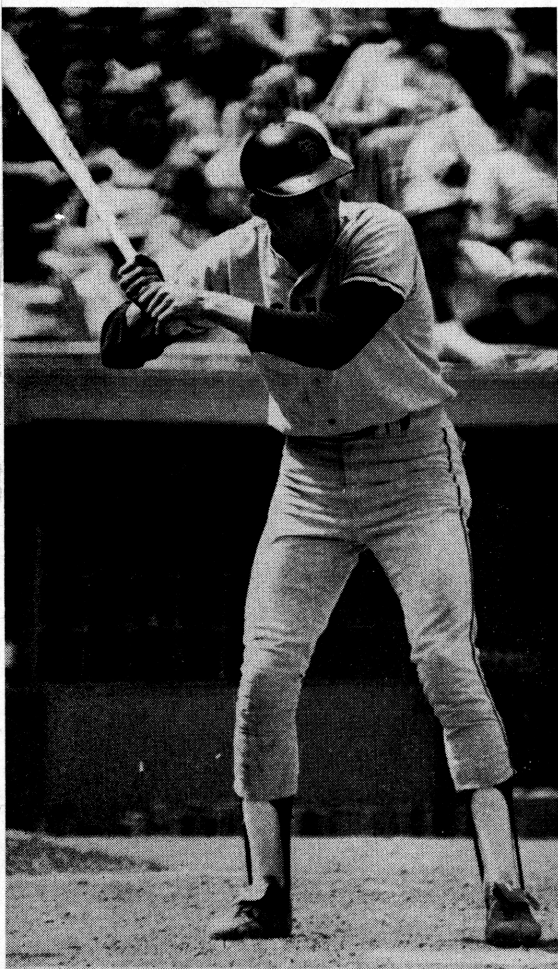
*Third, he must be healthy—and lucky.* Think of Pete Reiser's one-too-frequent collisions with the outfield wall, or the fragility of Mickey Mantle's legs, which robbed him of as many as 2,000 at-bats. With the exception of a late-season ankle injury his first year in the league, Henry Aaron has been a remarkably healthy athlete, coming up to the plate almost 500 times in 1971, at the age of 37. It is (relatively) safe to say that no ballplayer will ever match Ruth's home-run *percentage*—an astonishing 8.5 per cent of all of Ruth's at-bats were home runs (Harmon Killebrew is

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second with a 7.3, and Aaron is ninth on the list with a 6.3) Therefore, anyone challenging Aaron had better plan on getting to the plate almost 11,300 at-bats to do what Ruth did in 8,399, and to challenge that record will take a lot of playing time.

*Fourth, he must play in the right ballpark.* Yankee Stadium was not simply the House that Ruth Built; it was the House Built for Ruth, with its inviting right-field fence.



Similarly, Atlanta Stadium was perfectly suited to Aaron's pursuit of Ruth. As SPORT's numbers man Allan Roth noted last spring, Aaron averaged 15.4 home runs annually in Milwaukee's County Stadium, but in Atlanta, he has averaged 22.4 a year. The Braves moved to Atlanta when Aaron was 32, supposedly past his physical prime.

And the dimensions of the ballpark—the height of its fences, their distance from home plate—aren't the only influences on a home-run hitter's consistency. "Here in Minnesota, the wind is a real factor," says Harmon Killebrew, himself once a favorite in the race to surpass the Babe. "It blows in in spring and fall, and out in summer. I had better luck in Detroit and in Boston," he adds.

But there were great power hitters whose luck was even worse than Killebrew's. Think of Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio, each playing in the wrong ballpark. DiMaggio was in Yankee Stadium, a dream park for the lefthanded Williams, and Williams was in Fenway Park, a dream park for the righthanded DiMaggio. Switch the sites of the two men's careers, and both might have approached 700 home runs.

*Fifth, he must play the right positions.* "If anyone who was playing now was to break Aaron's record," says San Francisco's Bobby Bonds, "I would say—on talent alone—Reggie Jackson, Cesar Cedeno and Johnny Bench have the best chance. Of course Bench would be hurt by the fact that he's a catcher."

Johnny Bench is one of baseball's best hitters, but a catcher's legs invariably betray him. The constant pressure makes it all but impossible for a Bench, or any other catcher, to remain a top-flight athlete in his late 30's, which appears crucial to any future hitter of 700-plus home runs.

*Sixth, he must be strong enough, well-conditioned enough, to remain effective in his last years.* In his last five major-league seasons, Wil-

**The Giants' Dave Kingman says that the idea of anyone hitting 40 home runs year after year is "almost beyond belief."**

lie Mays hit 73 home runs. In Aaron's last five seasons (through 1973), he hit 203. Find a power hitter who will retain his strength past 35, and you have found a candidate to challenge Henry Aaron.

But while the physical strength that helps a ballplayer dodge nagging injuries is a prerequisite, sheer size and power may be less important than most fans think. "I don't think that size has that much to do with it," says the Giants' Dave Kingman, who, at six-six, should know. "Aaron is average in size, but he has great quickness. Mays also had quickness and strength, but not height. My ability to hit the ball out of the park is due to quickness, too, not size."

These, then, are the six ground rules for the game of who'll catch Aaron. Who *will* catch Henry Aaron? To make sense out of the question, understand what can and can't be proven about the candidates. You *can't* rule a player out of the running simply because of his current home-run efficiency. Why? Because these percentages can change radically. If a writer had taken Henry Aaron's first seven years in the league, he could have proven that, even if he played until 40, Aaron would hit no more than 540 home runs. A change of ballpark, the movement of an older National Leaguer into the American League with its designated-hitter rule, a teammate whose presence makes the semi-intentional base on balls risky (as Lou Gehrig did for Ruth and Roger Maris did for Mantle), all these things can radically change a player's home run chances.

Essentially, we can group the candidates into three classes: The old masters, the superstars, and the comers.

*The Old Masters:* Forget it. Harmon Killebrew, in strictly statistical terms, is the most impressive home run hitter since Babe Ruth, averaging 7.3 home runs for every 100 at-bats. The problem is, at the end of 1973 he had only 7,500 at bats, and in June Killebrew turned 38.



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With 546 homers at the start of 1974, it's just not possible. Frank Robinson, Willie McCovey, Billy Williams, are all over 35 and cannot hope to approach Aaron unless they put three or four 50-home-run seasons back-to-back-to-back.

*The Superstars:* Remember this number: 6.3. It's Aaron's home run percentage over a 20-year career virtually free of interruptions. Now look at the established superstars in the game. In the National League apart from Aaron, Willie Stargell is the leading power hitter, with a 6.2 percentage. At 33, he had 321 home runs going into this season, an average of just under 30 a season. But over the last four seasons, Stargell has averaged more than 41 home runs a season. Even at this higher pace, he would still have barely 600 home runs by the time he turned 40.

In the American League, the standout power hitter is Reggie Jackson. Says Killebrew: "Reggie comes nearer than anyone else playing now that I can think of in terms of approaching Aaron's record." But, at age 28, Jackson's career percentage is only 5.8, with 189 home runs—an average of just about 30 per season over the last five years. With these numbers, it's hard to see him approaching 600. It's true, however, that Jackson has suffered from injuries as well as an unfinished temperament. Given his enormous ability, and his remarkable competitive drive, Jackson may be the strongest bet among the established stars in the league. Ironically, Jackson's best chance at Aaron's record

would probably be a trade to an also-ran, where his aggressiveness would have to turn from thoughts of winning a pennant to more personal glories.

None of the other first-ranked players are in the race now. Dick Allen, Johnny Bench, Pete Rose—none of them have the kind of production that suggests a shot at 700 homers.

*The Comers:* For some guidance on the younger players, I turned to Ed Howsam, a scout for the Cincinnati Reds who is based in Phoenix. He began by warning of the risks in this kind of prediction.

"When Henry Aaron started out, he was a second baseman," Howsam said. "He developed into a home run hitter. There was no one who would have said 20 years ago that he'd have a chance to break Ruth's record. And it's really difficult to tell about young hitters. With young pitchers, you can tell right away, but you have to see

how a youngster will hit big league pitching."

Putting aside the minor league hitters ("I haven't really come across anyone in the minors with that kind of power"), Howsam looked at the younger major league players. "Bobby Bonds is probably the best athlete in the game right now," he said. For total all-around performance—hitting, running, throwing, fielding—he may well stand out. But Bonds as the new home run king? He's 28, with a home run efficiency under five percent.

Cesar Cedeno? "He's small, but Aaron wasn't too big when he started out." Cedeno had only 64 home runs going into this season, but he is also only 23 years old. Home runs do not carry well in the Houston Astrodome; so here is one contender who probably can't hope to challenge Ruth unless he is traded to another team with a more inviting ballpark.



Reggie Jackson's chances to approach Aaron's record would improve if he were traded from Oakland to an also-ran.

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Then Howsam brought up San Francisco's Dave Kingman. "If he ever puts it all together, he's going to be incredible—he's got Ruthian power." At 6-6, 210 pounds, Kingman is the biggest hitter in baseball since Frank Howard. He has only 59 home runs in his first three seasons, but Kingman has been up only 892 times. His home run percentage is 6.6—except for Killebrew and McCovey, the only percentage among active players to top Aaron's. At 25, Kingman is off to a slow start, but as a slugger in the older mold, he is also the kind of ballplayer who could put together a string of 40-plus seasons and move into contention.

Kingman himself thinks the task is an awesome one. "I still haven't really grasped what Aaron did," he admits. "I can think of an individual hitting 40 home runs in *one* season, but to do it year after year after year . . . that's almost beyond belief!"

John Mayberry of Kansas City, Philadelphia's Greg Luzinski, Jeff Burroughs of Texas, are all other young comers with home run power. Baltimore's rookie Jim Fuller hit 39 homers with Rochester of the International League in 1973 and seems on his way to establishing himself as a power hitter. Each of these players is a man of promise and potential.

But in the end, Bobby Bonds may have the definitive answer. "I don't think that there is any ballplayer right now who will make it," he says. "If somebody does break it, it'll have to be somebody who'll be born tomorrow.

"For now," he adds, "Henry Aaron is safe." ■