

SAY HEY!

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

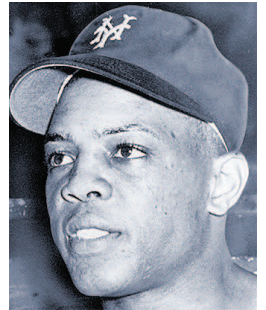
Seventy years ago, the man who would become one of the greatest Major League Baseball players of all time, Willie Mays, hit his first home run.

What's more: The 20-year-old slugger for the New York Giants hit that dinger off the all-time left-handed wins leader, Warren Spahn.

Mays had gone professional as a 17-year-old, playing for the Negro League's Chattanooga Choo-Chos and the Birmingham Black Barons. As soon as he graduated high school, the New York Giants signed him and sent him to the minor leagues — first to Trenton, N.J., and then to Minneapolis. Mays hit .477 in 35 games with the Minneapolis Millers, so the Giants called him up to the big show in May 1951.

Mays went hitless in his first three games against the Phillies at Shibe Park in Philadelphia. But at home against the Boston Braves in his 13th Major-League at-bat and with two outs in the first inning, Mays took Spahn long over the left field roof of the Polo Grounds.

Even sitting out the better part of his second season and all of his third after being drafted, Mays would go on to become one of baseball's biggest stars, acquiring the nickname "the Say Hey Kid." Mays would play for 22 seasons for the Giants and the New York Mets.



Mays before his first game with the New York Giants.

Willie Mays' career major league stats

BOLD indicates led the league

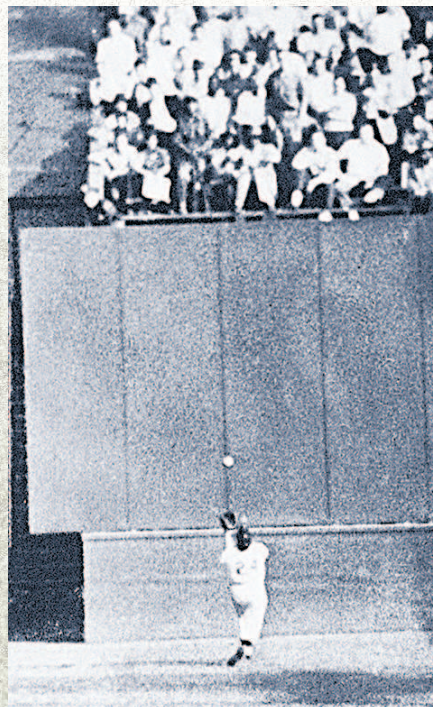
YEAR	TEAM	G	AB	R	H	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BA	SLG	TB
1951	NY Giants	121	464	59	127	5	20	68	7	.274	.472	219
1952	NY Giants	34	127	17	30	4	4	23	4	.256	.409	52
1953	Did not play — Military service											
1954	NY Giants	151	565	119	195	13	41	110	8	.345	.667	377
1955	NY Giants	152	580	123	185	13	51	127	24	.319	.659	382
1956	NY Giants	152	578	101	171	8	36	84	40	.296	.557	322
1957	NY Giants	152	585	112	195	20	35	97	38	.333	.626	366
1958	SF Giants	152	600	121	208	11	29	96	31	.347	.583	350
1959	SF Giants	151	575	125	180	5	34	104	27	.313	.583	335
1960	SF Giants	153	595	107	190	12	29	103	25	.319	.555	330
1961	SF Giants	164	572	129	176	3	40	123	18	.308	.584	334
1962	SF Giants	162	624	130	189	5	49	141	18	.304	.615	382
1963	SF Giants	157	596	115	187	7	38	103	8	.314	.582	347
1964	SF Giants	157	578	121	171	9	47	111	19	.296	.607	351
1965	SF Giants	157	558	118	177	3	52	112	9	.317	.645	360
1966	SF Giants	152	552	99	159	4	37	103	5	.288	.556	307
1967	SF Giants	141	486	83	128	2	22	70	6	.263	.453	220
1968	SF Giants	148	498	84	144	5	23	79	12	.289	.488	243
1969	SF Giants	117	403	64	114	3	13	58	6	.283	.437	176
1970	SF Giants	139	478	94	139	2	28	83	5	.291	.506	242
1971	SF Giants	136	417	82	113	5	18	61	23	.271	.482	201
1972	Giants/Mets	88	244	35	61	1	8	22	4	.250	.402	98
1973	NY Mets	66	209	24	44	0	6	25	1	.211	.344	72
22 seasons		2,992	10,881	2,062	3,283	140	660	1,093	338	.302	.557	6,066

- Was named National League MVP in 1954 and 1965
- Won 12 consecutive Golden Gloves as an outfielder from 1957 to 1968
- Made 24 All-Star Game appearances
- Was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1979
- No. 6 all-time Major League Baseball career home run hitter
- No. 7 in career runs
- No. 9 in career games played
- No. 12 in career hits
- No. 12 in career RBIs
- No. 1 in career putouts by an outfielder: 7,095

Mays' most iconic moment

During his time in the Army — playing with the Army team at Fort Eustis in Newport News, Va. — Mays learned what he called "the basket catch." He'd hold his glove usually at waist-level and allow the ball to fall into it naturally. It made for a dramatic moment.

Mays would put this unique skill to use in the top of the eighth inning of Game 1 of the 1954 World Series when he made an over-the-shoulder catch near the outfield wall of the Polo Grounds, robbing Vic Wertz of the Cleveland Indians of a long hit that should have scored two runners. Mays would go on to score the winning run in the 10th inning of that game and the Giants would win the World Series.



"The Catch": Sept. 29, 1954

Mays would have other great moments as well. For example, he would hit four home runs and drive in eight runs against the Braves in Milwaukee on April 30, 1961. Two years later, he'd sign a new contract, becoming the highest-paid player in Major League history.

Mays would retire after the 1973 season, would serve as a coach for the Mets for six years and then rejoin the Giants as General Manager in 1986. In 2017, Major League Baseball would name its World Series MVP award after Mays.

Mays celebrated his 90th birthday earlier this month.

Sources: Baseball-Reference.com, Major League Baseball, National Baseball Hall of Fame, BleacherReport.com, "On This Day in Baseball History" by the Baseball Time Machine

ALL PHOTOS FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS