

Willie turns forty this week, but he seems to defy time itself—a hero who has transcended our declining ability to believe without ambivalence.



—Black Star

## The Age of Willie Mays

by PETER SCHRAG

*Time is of the essence. The shadow moves*

*From the plate to the box, from the box to second base,*

*From second to the outfield, to the bleachers.*

*Time is of the essence. The crowd and players*

*Are the same age always, but the man in the crowd*

*Is older every season. Come on, play ball! \**

It was always a game of myth and memory. The ritual transcended the moment of play, tested performance against immortality, and allowed otherwise ordinary men to place themselves in something larger than conventional time. Each spring brought its own renewal and each summer its moments of truth. The word came from Vero Beach and St. Pete and Scottsdale, where the big leaguers trained before the season: new faces and new ballyhoo, and new predictions

\*From Rolfe Humphries's "Polo Grounds" in *The Collected Poems of Rolfe Humphries*, ©1965 by Indiana University Press.

of who would be greater (someday) than Mantle, who could throw like Koufax, and who could run like Cobb. But there was more; there was the man in the crowd, his memories, his moments, his brush with greatness, and, above all, his return, year after year, to the places where the idols of the past, the anticipated glory of the future, and the remembrance of youth came together against the clipped green grass of the field in the afternoon sun, against the crowd, and against a ritual that, despite its historical brevity, seemed as old as time.

Those of us who came to know baseball when there was little television and no big-time professional football or basketball talked its language, heard its lore, and were taken with its special sense before we had ever played an organized game or pondered its beautiful mystery. There were giants on the field, men of legend whose voices we had never heard, whose faces we knew only from newspaper photographs or from the murky images on our bubble-gum cards, and whose records—batting average, home runs, runs batted in—suggested meaning beyond anything we understood. "Facts" supported myth, and myth magnified the

facts on which it was supposed to be based.

It was always a game of argument. The action on the field was never sufficient to fill the time, and it therefore required of its spectators something more than catcalls and cheers. After every play we confronted not only the opportunity but the necessity for discussion, analysis, and comparison, and it was in those long moments of inaction—when the teams changed sides, when the relief pitchers ambled in from the bullpen (in the days before they rode on golf carts), in the winter hiatus, in the stretches when nothing might ever happen again—that we, the fans, chose our idols and elected our heroes.

*Time is of the essence. The crowd and players are the same age always, but the man in the crowd is older every season.* Perhaps it will always be that way; perhaps the ritual will survive conditions that have destroyed other American perennials, and will live a charmed life into eternity. And yet something has changed: The crowd, too, is getting older; it is losing its small-town innocence and its capacity to believe without ambivalence, and the half-life of demigods becomes

## *"To see him now is like watching the instant replay of a generation...."*

shorter with each passing year. We make and discard them according to the requirements of the television schedule; we demand action—violent action—to fill the anxious moments, and we seem no longer capable of creating idols in our idleness.

There is nothing new in the argument that something is destroying baseball—avaricious major league club owners buying and selling franchises, moving teams, abandoning old fans, and wooing new ones with cast-off bush league players who should be selling sporting goods or life insurance; mounting expenses; the competition of other activities; and the influence of television itself. But these things—though they are, for some of us, matters of concern—are hardly as significant as the fate of the hero himself. Each generation likes to say that there will never be another Ruth, another DiMaggio, another Ted Williams, congratulating itself (as mythology must have it) that it lived in the last great age of heroism and achievement. Ask any big league manager and he will remind you that the eclipse of one generation of stars always heralds the rise of another. It is only the man in the crowd who is older every season. The players are more skilled—are larger, faster, stronger—than any in history.

And yet this time they are wrong. We will have great players, but we have left the age of the mythic hero. The immortals were forged in innocence, products of the belief that this was one nation with a single set of values, that any boy might succeed, of the ability to say "Wow" without embarrassment, and of the nearly magical capacity of big league baseball to preserve its small-town qualities within the secure confines of big-city stadiums. Once we walked through the turnstiles, we all became boys again, breathed a little easier, and enjoyed the protection of the ritual, the memories, the immersion in another dimension of time.

For many of us who came to our baseball in those more innocent days, only one great man is left, and his name is Willie Mays. This week—on May 6—he became forty years old, and he should, therefore, be well past his prime, an aging star dogged by fragile legs, trick knees, fatigue, and the other assorted aches and pains that the flesh of annuating athletes is supposed to suffer. But Mays moves with the grace of memory, defying time, defying the inexorable erosion of fantasies, defying age itself. He remains unequivocally

our man. To see him now is like watching the instant replay of a generation, the crowds of twenty years, the old ball parks with their erratic dimensions and their even more erratic fans, Hilda Chester and the Dodger Symphony at Ebbets Field, the short right field foul line in the Polo Grounds, where Mel Ott, among others, once hit his "Chinese" home runs. And, of course, there is the image of Mays himself: the unbelievable catches, the 3,000 base hits, the 630-odd home runs (second only to Babe Ruth's lifetime total), the elegance that, when we first saw it in 1951, could hardly be comprehended. Mays always moved differently from other players, started instinctively toward the place where the ball was hit—moving from his center field position almost, it seemed, before the batter swung—and he caught fly balls against his belt with the palm of his glove turned up, playing with a casual defiance of error, a disdain for security, and with an emphasis on style that repudiated mere professional competence.

When Mays came to the Giants in 1951, Jackie Robinson, who broke the color line in major league baseball, already had been with the Dodgers for four years; in the meantime, moreover, a handful of other Negro players had been signed, and they were being cautiously accepted by the fans and players. But Mays brought with him something that I imagine the game rarely enjoyed before, and that can only be described as aristocratic class. Despite his notorious disregard for the official causes of civil rights (for which he was later attacked by Robinson himself), Mays was not merely a ball-player who happened to be Negro; he was a black athlete. He ran black, swung black, and caught black. He did not play the man's game but his own, and his every move disparaged the tight-assed honkies who did things by the book. William Goldman, in a book about the theater, recalled what Mays had done for him: "It was about time he arrived on my horizon, because during all those years of being bored by baseball, of sitting on bleacher seats for pitchers' battles, or dying from the heat while the manager brought in some slow reliever, I'd been waiting for Willie. He was what it was all about." There are countless thousands of us who felt the same way. Mention Mays now and you find more people who claim to have seen his first game with the Giants than could ever have

squeezed into the Polo Grounds that day; more who remember his impossible catch of Vic Wertz's 440-foot drive in the 1954 World Series than ever attended a Series game. Of such stuff are legends made.

This spring, for the first time, I made the pilgrimage, a forty-year-old man pursuing another forty-year-old who was the idol of the boy. Instant replay—what every kid used to dream about, and what many still do—sitting in the Arizona sun, or leaning against the batting cage to feel the intensity of the pitch and the opposing concentration of the hitter, or, again, standing in the locker room to watch the man who preserves the fantasy. Spring training. The symbols of time come together, old players and young, Hall of Famers and rookies, welding a continuity that goes back beyond remembrance: Carl Hubbell, Hall of Fame pitcher who won 253 games between 1928 and 1943, the man who struck out Ruth, Gehrig, Foxx, Simmons, and Cronin—one after another—in the 1934 All-Star game (now director of the Giants' farm system) sitting by the dugout; Wes Westrum, who managed the Mets in leaner days, hitting ground balls to the infield; Larry Jansen, who helped pitch the Giants into the World Series in 1951, watching the young pitchers warming up—kids just up from Fresno and Amarillo and St. Cloud.

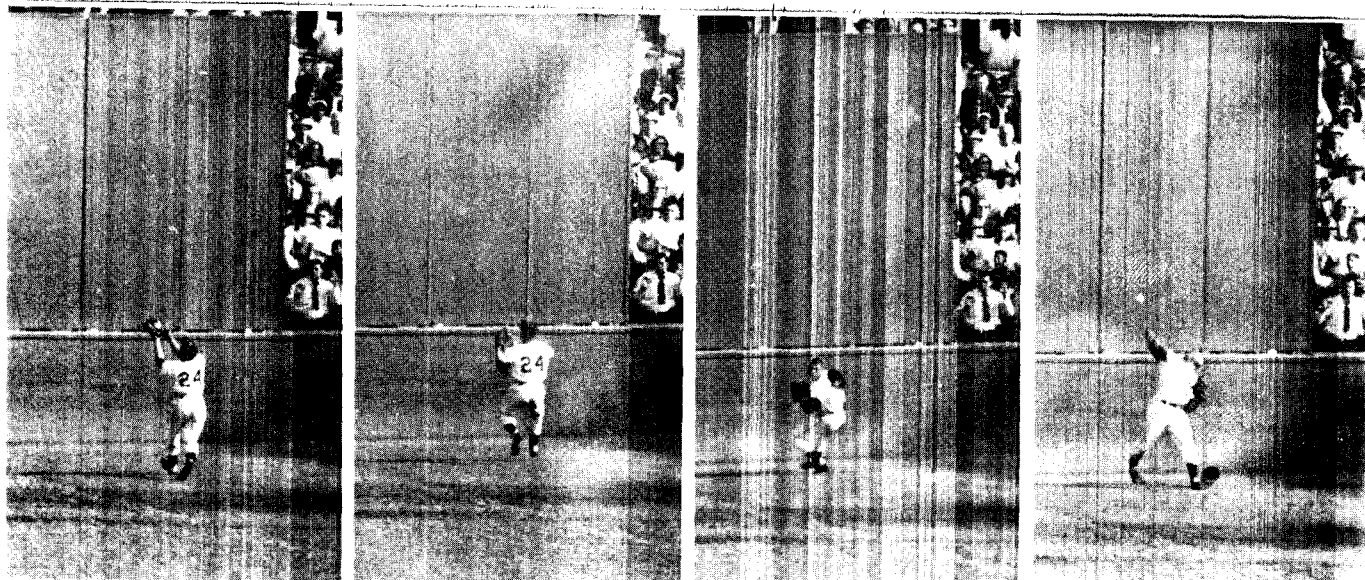
Around the field the sports writers are trying to grab a few crumbs for tomorrow's paper, looking for another rookie of promise, escalating every solid drive into a slugger's future, and in the bleachers people with memories longer than mine are discussing games played twenty years before I was born. Juan Marichal, another player of supreme elegance, is pitching batting practice. (High kick, the left foot higher than the head, the ball coming from some deep recess of motion, the glove brushing the knee as the ball is thrown, and turning an ordinary man of six feet into a fantastic engine of power.) Mays, his right foot dug in at the rear of the batter's box, hits a couple to the fence in left center, then takes a pitch low and away.

"I can't hit that," he says to Marichal. "Can't hit that no way."

Marichal pitches another, again low and a little outside, and Mays smokes it on a line over the head of the short-stop.

"That was the same pitch," Marichal says. "The same pitch."

"I had to hit it," Mays answers, his



—Wide World

Mays in the 1954 World Series making what many regarded as an impossible catch of a drive by Vic Wertz of Cleveland.

voice rising and, at the same time, a little resigned. Logic loses to performance, and Charlie Fox, the Giants' manager, turns from his position behind the batting cage with an expression of futile amazement: What can you say when you are supervising a genius?

Mays still plays the same game. After the first two weeks of the 1971 season, he led the league in runs batted in and was among the leaders in batting average and home runs. Twenty years and three thousand games later the style hasn't changed. He will run a little less this year, steal fewer bases, skip—with Charlie Fox's blessings—the fatiguing Tuesday and Friday night games at Candlestick Park, the Giants' home field in San Francisco, but the moves are all the same, and the virtuosity is unblemished. He protects himself in a dozen different ways: He does not drink or smoke; throws underhand whenever possible to protect the arm and shoulder; takes his meals in his room when the team is on the road; walks onto the Arizona practice field wearing a warmup jacket so the autograph hunters, failing to recognize his face, won't swarm to his number; melts away from practice before the other players and slips into his pink Imperial, license number SAY HEY, to drive to lunch and then to a round of golf. "He never stands when he can sit," says Fox, "and he never sits when he can lie down."

In the locker room he is a person—or, better, a kid, shifting moods from highpitched exuberance to petulance—and in the stadium he is a demigod, but between them he becomes an apparition that materializes and evaporates according to its own impulse. Perhaps, you say, he is hurting, suffering the anguish of exploitation, of too many games, too many pitchers, too many sellers of clothes, bats,

gloves, buttons, pictures, and causes, too many journalists asking questions—how much did he sign for? how much does he want?—too much pressure, but he has no intention of thinking about himself as a man of complexity or as the aging star (like Mantle) whose every painful move becomes a heroic act. His public role is to remain a player only—a man who plays—because he seems incapable of any other part.

And yet it is hard for anyone to tell how much is man, how much boy, and how much the distillation of idolatry. We are sitting in the team dining room at the Francisco Grande, an Arizona hotel owned by the Giants: Mays, wearing asparagus-green trousers, a green turtle-neck shirt, and a green cardigan sweater; Sy Berger of New York, the king of the bubble-gum cards—which, he explains, are bigger than ever with the kids—and the boy from New York. Somewhere else another presence of Mays is negotiating a new contract with the Giants—he has asked for \$75,000 a year for ten years, but the reporters, after the contract is signed, guess \$165,000 a year for two years—and he is clearly concerned about something that other people would call the future. But here at lunch Mays talks only about playing ball—"I'm not thinking about five years from now"—and complaining about the old photographs that Berger uses on his bubble-gum cards. Berger answers that Mays looks the same as ever, and Mays screws up his face and says sheeit . . . Somehow, I tell myself, he seems to make it possible to contemplate the old days without confronting the matter of age itself, but I am not really sure. Which one of us is the kid, and which one the man of maturity? (A good businessman, say the flacks around the field—invest-

ments, endorsements, he's got a bundle—but the speculation in the swamp between myth and reality is so rank that anything goes.) I do not know, therefore, just how the fantasies lodge between us, but I do sense some regret (mine, perhaps; yet possibly his) about the past.

Before the Giants moved from New York to San Francisco, Mays spent part of his free time playing stickball with the kids in Harlem, going from the Polo Grounds to the streets not as an act of charity but as an activity of natural joy. (Although he was good there, too, he was not the best; but that may indeed have been an act of charity.) He does not do such things anymore—they don't play stickball in California, he said—nor has he ever become the idol in San Francisco that he had been in New York. They have a show-me attitude out there, one of the sports writers explained, very sophisticated compared to the hayseeds in New York, and that, too, seems a pity. How can one tell them—for the sake of everything, for Mays, for the game, for the nation—that the height of baseball sophistication is exuberance and the instinct to understand the subtle line between the ingenuous and the hyperbolic, and between the serious and the comic?

You leave your reservations and ambivalence at the gate. This is a conservative game that sometimes oozes with unbounded chauvinism—about the country, the flag, and itself—and that cannot tolerate even the most minimal expressions of dissent. There are players—Joe Pepitone of the Cubs, for example—who wear their hair long, and others who have associated themselves with the peace movement, or who read Dostoevsky, but most clubs and players regard every manifesta-

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# Saturday Review



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## Decline and Fall of Congressman Day

In *SR*'s first April issue, a communication from one K. Jason Sitewell appeared on our letters page. The letter called on the editors and readers to oppose H.R. 6142, a bill introduced by Representative A. F. Day and co-sponsored by forty three Congressmen. The stated purpose of the bill was to restrict the size of private parks as well as to democratize public parks that were sparsely used. Mr. Sitewell asserted he was in a position to say positively that the actual purpose of the bill was to abolish golf. He had known Congressman Day since early childhood and could bear witness to his persistent and "psychotic" hostility to the game. This aversion, Sitewell said, was perhaps understandable in view of the Day family's tragic history in the sport. Day's grandfather had perished in a sand trap, the victim of massive exasperation. Less than a decade later, Day's father expired soon after hitting nineteen balls into a pond in front of a three-par green.

Sitewell detailed yet other unspeakable horrors and abominations associated with the sport that had caused young A. F. Day to grow up with a fierce and fixed purpose. He was determined to destroy the so-called sport that had brought untold suffering to his mother and sisters and that had produced, across the nation, hundreds of thousands of coronaries, ulcers, broken homes, lost jobs, etc., etc.

Sitewell's letter was, of course, a spoof, full of absurd concoctions and broad hints, the broadest of which was the connection between the Congress-

man's name and the one day of the year when spoofing and nonsense have glorious sanction.

What happened? Enough to warrant a serious major sociological study. We have learned of emergency meetings called by boards of governors of golf clubs for the purpose of taking vigorous and far-reaching action to defeat Day's bill. At least a dozen Congressmen or their assistants telephoned to say that opposition to H. R. 6142 had turned up high on the daily tally list of what constituents were protesting. The nation's leading weekly golf magazine reprinted Sitewell's letter on its editorial page under the title "A Frightening Bill" and called on its readers to defend the sport against this sudden and malicious legislative assault. The wife of a federal judge in Illinois telephoned *SR* to ask for reprints to send to her husband and his cronies, who had gone off on their annual golf holiday, leaving their wives at home.

So it went, incident piled on incident, until *The Wall Street Journal* ran a delightful front-page story revealing the spoof. Among the disclosures was the fact that H. R. 6142 is actually a bill to limit the liability of national banks for certain taxes.



As usually happens in a hoax, there are interesting implications and even things of value to be learned. First of all, it became apparent soon after Sitewell's letter appeared that non-golfers were far quicker than golfers to recognize the letter as an open-faced satire connected to April 1st. Is it possible that the absurdities immediately perceived as such by non-golfers were regarded by golfers as reminders of poignant reality? Is there a golfer who, upon hitting into a sand trap, does not fear deep in his subconscious that he may never get out? Is there a golfer who does not suffer more anguish over hitting expensive new balls into ponds than he does over reverses in his business or profession? Can any canard or calamity be concocted about the sport that does not have a parallel in the golfer's own experience? We ask these questions not only from the editorialist's chair but from the confession box as an addict who is himself mercilessly hounded by double-bogeys.

It is also significant perhaps that in none of the clamorous protest against H. R. 6142 were any questions raised about the devastating "facts" assembled by Congressman Day in support of his bill. No attempt was made by those who protested the bill to refute the long laundry list of dreadful consequences Day attributed to golf. It is of course not true that the game, in an average year, produces 75,000 coronary occlusions, or 83,000 cases of hypertension and ulcers, or 9,300 golf-cart fatalities—nor that golf courses occupy twice as much land as all the natural parks put together, nor that playing golf has caused 60,000 broken homes (although one wonders whether this latter figure may not have some validity). None of these statistics were challenged in the valiant defense of the sport. Are we to believe that, even if these horrible facts were true, this would make no difference to golfers? Or is this an example perhaps of a larger truth: that many people who are directly affected by an issue are less concerned with facts than effects? Students of private and public psychology—or, for that matter, students of sociology and public opinion—might find the entire story of the Sitewell-Day affair replete with rewarding and significant material.

Finally, who is K. Jason Sitewell and why did *SR* publish his letter? The editor admits to being Sitewell, who has appeared under that name in these pages before—generally about the same time of year. The reason for the letter is that it is part of *SR*'s editorial philosophy to place the highest value on laughter. This is a serious magazine and it deals with serious is-

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