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Hank Aaron: Remembering a hero of the anti-racist struggle

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Home run champ Hank Aaron stood up to racism.

The world lost a revered baseball hero and an icon of the Black liberation struggle on Jan. 21: Hank Aaron. In 1974, Aaron broke Babe Ruth's record of 714 career home runs. At the time, Ruth's record was the holy grail of baseball.

A Black man, Aaron was raised in the Jim Crow South. He joined the Major League in 1954. But he was in the game long enough to have played for the Indianapolis Clowns of the Negro Leagues.

Aaron was already a well-established player by 1974. He was a Most Valuable Player (MVP) winner, an 18-time All Star, and a guaranteed Hall of Famer.

Nonetheless, as Aaron strode closer and closer to 714 home runs, the level of racism directed towards him intensified to a fever pitch. The racist violence Aaron faced during this stretch can be best described in his own words:

“It really made me see for the first time a clear picture of what this country is about. My kids had to live like they were in prison because of kidnap threats, and I had to live like a pig in a slaughter camp. I had to duck. I had to go out the back door of the ballparks.

“I had to have a police escort with me all the time,” [Aaron recalled in a 1994 interview](#). “I was getting threatening letters every single day. All of these things have put a bad taste in my mouth, and it won’t go away. They carved a piece of my heart away.”

In 1973, Aaron received 930,000 pieces of mail. Most of these letters were hate mail, racist rhetoric and death threats. Even the reporters who gave Aaron positive coverage were met with racist rage and condemnation.

Amidst this horror, Aaron nevertheless pushed forward. “Hammerin’ Hank,” as he was known, finally broke Ruth’s record on April 8, 1974. This milestone did not quiet the racists, but Aaron would continue on to hit a career total of 755 home runs.

Still, the experience was so awful that it led Aaron to ignore the game he loved dearly for decades after he retired.

Aaron made his historic achievement as a member of the Atlanta team that still takes its name from an anti-Indigenous slur. Hammerin’ Hank’s passing has renewed calls to finally do away with that racist name and [rechristen the team in his honor](#) as the Atlanta Hammers.

Hank Aaron should be remembered forever as a warrior against racism and a home run champ. Rest in power!

