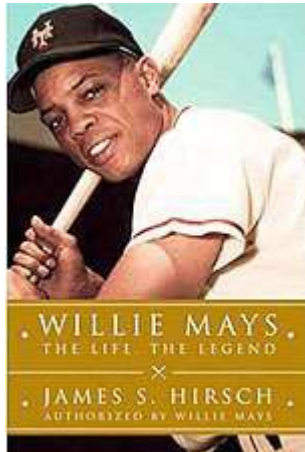


# Willie Mays, The Life, The Legend: Book honors most complete baseball player ever to play the game

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**BY JOHN ESPOSITO**

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## **BOOK REVIEW / COMMENTARY**

The baseball life of Willie Mays has been chronicled in countless books, magazines, film and song since his emergence as a 20-year-old rookie sensation with the New York Giants in May 1951. While the legendary heroics and statistics of the "Say Hey Kid" can be recited on command by many an adoring fan who cheered his magnificent artistry at the Polo Grounds, Candlestick Park and Shea Stadium, his personal life has always remained private and guarded.

It is only now with the release of his first authorized biography, *Willie Mays, The Life, The Legend* (Scribner, \$30.00 – 628 pages), that a small lining in the armor has been removed. The result is the most revealing portrait of the man to date, at least to the extent that Mr. Mays will permit, without a sense of intrusion.

The author, James S. Hirsch, 47, is a former reporter for The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, who wrote the bestseller, *Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter*. His latest journalistic offering may ultimately serve as the definitive biography of this baseball legend.

Through an extensive examination of his family history, we gain a sense of Willie's complex personality and athletic prowess. The boyish, carefree and exuberant traits are shown to interact with the remote and sometimes temperamental disposition of the American icon since childhood.

William Howard "Willie" Mays, Jr. was born on May 6, 1931 in Westfield, Alabama, a black mill town outside of Birmingham. His parents, who never married, were William Howard Mays, Sr., nicknamed Cat, and Annie Satterwhite. During the Depression years, Willie was raised primarily by his sometimes-absentee father and mother's two younger sisters. The youngster proved to be a high school standout in baseball, football and basketball, receiving instruction from Cat, who himself was a semipro ball player.

Hirsch's well-researched book details Mays's growth years in the late 1940s with the Birmingham Black Barons of the Negro Leagues, while still in high school, to his signing with the New York Giants in 1950 where he did a stint with a Class-B affiliate in Trenton, NJ, batting .353. Willie then graduated to the Triple A Minneapolis Millers in 1951 with a .477 batting average in the first 35 games, before the Giants called him up to the Major Leagues.

Despite growing up in the segregated Deep South, Mays escaped the blatant racism of the times, in part, due to his exceptional baseball skills. He was a young man on the move with only one apparent, immediate goal in mind – reaching the major leagues. After a slow start, under the guidance of his mentor and first Giants manager, Leo Durocher, the legend that is Willie Mays was born.

This informative biography provides a narrative account of his major accomplishments beginning in May 1951 through his retirement 22 years later as a New York Met in 1973.

Mays' individual records remain staggering. He received 1951 Rookie of the Year honors, Most Valuable Player awards in 1954 and 1965, the Hickok Belt as top professional athlete in 1954, eight consecutive 100-RBI seasons, twelve consecutive Gold Glove Awards and twenty-four appearances in the All-Star Game.

At the time of his retirement in 1973, Willie had accumulated a lifetime 3,283 hits, 338 stolen bases, a .302 batting average and slammed 660 home runs, ranking him third, at the time, and currently fourth on the all-time list (despite missing almost two years in 1952 and 1953 due to U.S. Army military service). The icing on the cake was his election to the Baseball Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility on January 23, 1979.

Some of the less popular aspects of Mays's personal life and career are delved into, including a bitter divorce from a first marriage, his current wife's affliction with Alzheimer's, and his financial difficulties. The author writes carefully of Willie's numerous collapses and hospitalizations for exhaustion, while only briefly mentioning his alleged amphetamine use.

Mr. Hirsch is more direct when discussing Willie Mays' failure to use his celebrity to directly address the issues of racism in American sports. Old ideas about race and class were dying at the time of his appearance on the scene. Disappointment in Mays' refusal to speak out was outwardly voiced by Jackie Robinson, who years earlier had broken baseball's color barrier.

The author, however, attempts to explain away Mays' lack of presence in the civil rights movement by asserting that Willie led by example, citing several examples of his diffusing racial issues on and off the team. The author clearly refuses to cast judgment, maintaining that it was not in Mays' character to be confrontational.

In 1958 the New York Giants moved to a new home in San Francisco. The change of landscape proved to be difficult for the young star. The Bay area fans did not immediately warm to Mays. The slugger had taken to the bright lights of New York and in return, the demanding New York faithful were simply wild about Willie.

Meanwhile, San Franciscans were eager to embrace their homegrown young stars, such as Orlando "The Baby Bull" Cepeda and Willie McCovey. Mays was viewed by many, as an interloper from big, bad New York. For a significant period of time, he would hear the loud boos resonate through windy Candlestick Park. However, in true Willie Mays fashion, his talent eventually won over the California natives. The now veteran superstar became San Francisco's adopted son, and in the process, a baseball immortal.



Due to time and circumstance, there is another chapter in the life of this legend that requires comment. It is the matter of steroids use and Barry Bonds, the latter-day San Francisco Giants superstar, who went on to pass his godfather – Mays – for third place on the all-time home run list. Willie refuses to disparage either his godson or baseball. Whether one wishes to agree with his silence or not, there can be no disagreement that it is based upon loyalty to his baseball family, which he emphatically will not criticize.

To understand the real impact of Willie Mays on America, one must examine the sports world at the time of his meteoric rise to fame. In the 1950s, the king of all sports was major league baseball and it had no serious challengers. Professional football and basketball were having growth spurts, boxing had its serious backers, but all remained distant contenders to the throne. Hockey, tennis and soccer were not even a consideration. A bat, glove, and ball were the charm for Willie. Baseball ruled.

The second ingredient was an appropriate venue to display this premier athlete's immense physical talents. That setting could be no other than New York, the media and sports capitol of the world. There was no better showcase to display Willie's magnificent baseball wizardry. Great sports heroes, such as Babe Ruth, Joe Louis and Joe DiMaggio, who triumphed in the great metropolis, were akin to cinema stars like John Wayne, Errol Flynn and Frank Sinatra. Their photos populated the pages of national newspapers and a variety of sports magazines, most of which were written by New York based writers.

New York in the 1950s held claim to publishing six daily newspapers at one time. Exposure could not have been greater elsewhere. Additionally, for the first seven years of Mays' professional baseball career there were no California baseball teams to attract fans. The only viable markets that competed were Boston, Chicago and Detroit, but on a much smaller scale. Madison Avenue was going about its business in fine form while New York ruled.

The last component to the mixture was probably the most significant and far-reaching – television, which was rapidly changing culture in America. Willie Mays and his 1950s contemporaries became the important faces of this newest medium. And although baseball reigned supreme, television molded a new generation of heroes from a variety of sports.

Americans were immediately captivated by the intimacy of the small picture tube and welcomed these celebrities into their living rooms. As the decade progressed many became household names – Johnny Unitas, Arnold Palmer, Rocky Marciano, Jim Brown, Pancho Gonzales, Duke Snider, Bob Cousy and Yogi Berra. Television bred familiarity and for the thousands who had television sets, many of these athletes became instant idols and almost surrogate family members.

In the case of baseball, most games were played in the daytime. During summer vacation, baby boomers weaned in the New York metropolitan area had the luxury of watching televised baseball games several days each week. These youngsters saw their favorite players perform on a regular basis, much like the mostly stay at home moms of the era, who tuned in to the popular television soap operas of the day.

During the Eisenhower years there was really only one baseball star that Willie Mays would continually be compared. He, like Willie, was a rookie phenom, just 19-years old, born in Oklahoma, who arrived at spring training camp in 1951. This young star would soon hone his craft directly across the Harlem River from Willie's team at the Polo Grounds. He, too, would make his fortune playing the most prestigious of the nine positions – centerfield. His workplace was in a building known as the Yankee Stadium.

The ball player was Mickey Mantle. As comparisons go, Mays and Mantle exemplified the new breed of baseball superstar athletes in the 1950s. Blessed with a multitude of baseball skills rather than one, theirs was more the exception than the rule. They could run like deer through the deep canyons of centerfield, they could steal bases, they could field, they had strong throwing arms, they could hit for a high batting average and most of all, they could populate ballparks at home and on the road, with millions of paying customers by nature of their incredible home run power.

Mickey Mantle was my baseball hero and the New York Yankees my team. They always were and always will be. Deep down, however, I knew the truth but was reluctant to come clean. While The Mick had arguably more pure power and could drive balls farther distances, I must concede that Willie Mays was the more complete ball player. Mantle, himself, acknowledged that they both performed neck and neck for a number of years, until one year (probably beginning in 1965), when Mays accelerated past him in every aspect of the game, as if he was standing still.

Whether Mantle's failure to continue at a superstar pace was because his skills were eroding, or because the many injuries finally betrayed him, or because of a failure to take care of his body, is all irrelevant. The final record speaks for itself. Willie Mays comes out the clear winner.

So what then is it about Willie Mays? Why the appeal of the man? What are the intangibles that set him apart from other great athletes? Is it the magical name – W-I-L-L-I-E M-A-Y-S? Is it the boyhood enthusiasm with which he played the game – the infectious smile and laugh? Is it the thrill of watching him clout a home run – or running the bases with galloping speed, culminating in that great Mays's slide into second base – Safe! – or chasing a long outfield fly, losing his cap in pursuit, ending in cool bravado with the patented "basket" catch?

Is it "The Catch," his incredible on the run, over the shoulder catch of Vic Wertz's dead centerfield blast? Is it reveling at the black and white photos and film of Willie playing stickball with kids on the Harlem streets, after his returning home from an actual Giants game? Is it the man's gentle kindness to children throughout his lifetime while maintaining a cool reserve towards strangers?

The answers are in all of the above and also in an unrehearsed response from the local reference librarian in my town, who is too young to remember Willie's time. When I asked recently if she could please place this new sports biography on hold for me, her answer was not surprising in the least: "Oh, I love Willie Mays!" And to which I replied, "So do I." And so does an entire nation, which cherishes the most complete baseball player ever to play the game.