

**THE ONE HUNDRED
MOST IMPORTANT PLAYERS
IN BASEBALL HISTORY**

LINCOLN A. MITCHELL



Advance Praise for The One Hundred Most Important Players in Baseball History

“Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Willie Mays, and Barry Bonds are all names mentioned when fans and historians create lists of baseball’s all-time greats. Lincoln Mitchell takes on a journey through baseball’s past and present by shifting our focus from thinking about the greatest of all time to the most important players in the modern game. Entries offer distinct insights into players and events of the modern game. Superstars and lesser accomplished players are looked at in new light, enhancing our appreciation for baseball’s history from the perspective of the narratives that mean the most to us and explain the modern game’s evolution, good and bad. Bryce Harper’s importance thus emerges not just from his being a superstar but of how his path to Major League Baseball unveils the talent development pipeline that evolved in the early 21st century in the United States. A thought-provoking read for baseball enthusiasts.”

Adrian Burgos, Jr., Professor at University of Illinois and author of *Playing America’s Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line*

“No sport has had a greater impact on American social and political culture than baseball and no one has a greater grasp of that impact than Lincoln Mitchell. *The One Hundred Most Important Players in Baseball History* is essential reading for anyone who wishes to truly understand the relationship between America and its National Pastime and for anyone whose love of baseball extends beyond the mere appreciation of numbers in a box score.”

Craig Calcaterra, Cup of Coffee Baseball Newsletter and author of *Rethinking Fandom: How to Beat the Sports-Industrial Complex at Its Own Game*.

“Lincoln Mitchell has done us a great service by taking the discussion of ‘greatest players in history’ away from statistics and reframing it around social impact, thereby giving us a list not of the batters with the most homers or the pitchers with the most wins, but of the men and women who made the most significant contributions to the American story that is both reflected in and embodied by our national game. In short, here is the intersectionality of baseball recognized and indispensably codified.”

Steven Goldman, host of the Infinite Inning podcast and author of *Baseball's Brief Lives*.

“Lincoln Mitchell has done it again! In his latest book, the prolific political analyst and baseball historian revises the ‘best ever player’ genre of sportswriting by providing novel insights on the impact of baseball on American society. A fascinating and engaging read.”

Frank A. Guridy, Professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies, Columbia University and author of *The Sports Revolution: How Texas Changed the Culture of American Athletics*

“Lincoln Mitchell delivers an outstanding comprehensive overview of the history of baseball in a unique way in this wonderful book. Mitchell discusses the great players, the great moments, and baseball’s great history while also making astute observations on the many struggles the game has faced since its inception. This book pulls no punches. Lincoln Mitchell shares the stories of baseball’s past while also using his deep knowledge of American history and the political world and to bring this compelling book together. Baseball fans will want to read, discuss, and debate the conclusions in this original and compelling book. The player biographies are concise, but extremely thought-provoking. This is bound to become a baseball classic.”

Dr. Paul Semendinger, author of *Roy White: From Compton to the Bronx, The Least Among Them*, and *Scattering the Ashes*.

The One Hundred Most Important Players in Baseball History

by

Lincoln A. Mitchell



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One Henry Aaron

Henry Aaron began his career in 1952 as an eighteen-year-old middle infielder for the Indianapolis Clowns, a Negro League franchise that was trying to survive as the integration of the American and National Leagues was devastating the Negro Leagues. Aaron's career wrapped up 24 years later when he was a designated hitter for the Milwaukee Brewers who were then in the American League.

The long career of Henry Aaron was central to the history of baseball in the post-war era. Aaron's brief time with the Clowns meant that when he retired following

the 1976 season, he was the last Negro Leaguer to play in the American or National League. In that regard, Aaron was the last link between the baseball of Oscar Charleston and Josh Gibson with that of modern MLB. Aaron remained sufficiently famous into his late 80s that his vaccination against Covid-19 in January of 2021 was covered in the national media.

Henry Aaron was one of the greatest players ever. By the time he made it to the National League and the Milwaukee Braves in 1954, Aaron was no longer an infielder and had moved to the

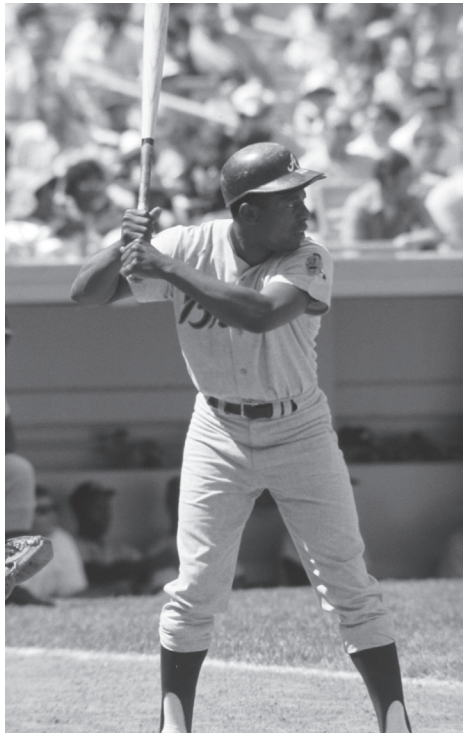


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outfield, but he could do everything on the ball field. He was a solid defender with a strong arm who was fast enough to steal 20 or more bases six times, but his true value was as a hitter, particularly because he was so consistent. Aaron had an OPS+ of at least 140 every season from 1955-1973 a period where he averaged 37 home runs and 150 games played every season. National League teams played only 154 games until 1962.

Aaron's 143 WAR is seventh on the all-time list, but Aaron is most known for breaking Babe Ruth's all-time home run record in 1974. Aaron ended the 1973 season with 713 home runs, one short of Ruth's career total of 714, so as the 1974 season approached Aaron was poised to tie and then break the record early in that season. This was a much bigger deal in those years than it would be today. Baseball in the early 1970s was in its waning days as the national pastime, but still played a major role in American culture. Babe Ruth had been dead for more than a quarter century by then, but he was still an American hero and, unlike today, there were still many baseball fans around who had seen Ruth play. This meant that Aaron's home run chase was a major national story. I was just becoming aware of baseball at the time and remember people saying that Aaron only was able to break the record because of the longer seasons since expansion, that Ruth has spent the first few years of his career as a pitcher, or even, absurdly, that Aaron traveled by plane while Ruth had to endure long train rides. However, Aaron also played in an integrated league, thus ensuring better competition, had to play many games at night and, towards the end of his career, had to bat against fresh relievers in the late innings rather than exhausted starting pitchers.

The home run record chase also occurred at a time, like so many others in American history, when race and civil rights were at the center of national politics. As he closed in on Ruth's record Aaron was bombarded with racist letters and threats of the ugliest nature. Many white fans were furious that one of baseball's most important records—and for the previous forty years, no record had been as important as Ruth's 714 home runs—was going to be broken by an African American. These fans did not hesitate

to share their anger with Aaron. Additionally, Aaron was playing for the Atlanta Braves, in the heart of the deep south. When Aaron finally broke the record on April 8th, 1974 against Dodgers hurler Al Downing, it was covered as a story of racial triumph. Vin Scully, who was calling the game for the Dodgers captured this sentiment “What a marvelous moment for baseball. What a marvelous moment for Atlanta and the state of Georgia. What a marvelous moment for the country and the world. A black man is getting a standing ovation in the deep south for breaking a record of an all-time baseball idol. And it’s a great moment for all of us.” Unfortunately, despite Scully’s inspiring words, Aaron’s path to the home run record was one that revealed, rather than redeemed, racism in baseball.

Aaron’s record lasted 34 years, almost as long as Ruth’s record had stood, before it was broken by Barry Bonds whose prodigious power numbers have been tainted by the strong likelihood that he was using performance enhancing drugs (PEDs). Many, including Bud Selig, who served as Commissioner of Baseball from 1998-2015, still view Aaron as the all-time home run leader.

The sheer longevity of Henry Aaron’s career in baseball—he served as an executive for the Braves well into the 21st century—is extraordinary. He is one of the few inner circle all-time greats who worked in baseball well after his playing days. Towards the end of his playing years, Aaron was known for mentoring young African American players, particularly if they were outfielders. Among those for whom he played this role was a young Dusty Baker, who later played a similar role in the career of a young Glenn Burke. Both Baker and Burke will be discussed later in this book. Aaron died in 2021 a few days before what would have been his 87th birthday. Shortly before his death, Aaron was vaccinated against the Corona virus as part of an effort to encourage African Americans to trust the vaccines.

Henry Aaron’s impact on baseball was enormous. In addition to being one of the greatest players ever, and a longtime executive, and facing terrible racism simply because he was an African American man who broke one of the game’s sacred records, Aaron was a role model and mentor to many players.

Two Dick Allen

The exclusion of African Americans from the American and National Leagues until 1947 meant that great players like Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell and Oscar Charleston, never had the chance to compete against the top white players of their era in a formal league setting. Most baseball fans are aware of that, but there is another later generation of players who had the chance to play in the integrated big leagues, but due to racism and related pressures did not achieve what they might have on the ballfield. No player is a better example of that than Dick Allen.



Photo courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum
(Allen Richie 5090.72_HS_NBL)

Dick Allen was primarily a first and third baseman, who played a little left field as well. During his career from 1963-1977, he was mostly known as a slugger. He hit thirty or more home runs, back when thirty home runs meant something, six times, and led his league in slugging percentage three times. His career OPS+ of 156 is tied for 23rd with Frank Thomas and is just ahead of Henry Aaron, Joe DiMaggio, Willie Mays, and Mel Ott's 155. Despite his extraordinary offensive numbers, during his career Allen was seen as never quite reaching his potential and, in the racially coded language of the time, was frequently described as controversial or difficult.

Allen grew up in Wampum, Pennsylvania a small town in the northwest part of the state, not far from Ohio. Two of his brothers, Hank and Ron, also played briefly in the Major Leagues. Fans of 1970s baseball may remember that in 1977, while playing for the A's in the last year of his career, Allen briefly wore the word "Wampum" on the back of his jersey instead of his name.

Allen signed with the Phillies as a fifteen-year-old, but league rules prohibited him from joining the organization until he graduated from Wampum High School shortly after he turned eighteen years old. From 1960-1962, Allen played in the low minors for the Phillies and hit wherever he went. In 1963 he was promoted to the Phillies' AAA affiliate, the Arkansas Travelers. Allen had never experienced the deep south before and was the first African American to play for the Travelers.

The racism aimed at Allen in Arkansas was intense and Allen, rightly, felt the Phillies organization did little to protect him from the worst of it. One way that Allen responded was by dominating the league with his bat. He slashed .289/.341/.550 and was called up to the big league team at the end of the year. By 1964, Allen was in the Phillies Opening Day lineup batting third and playing third base. He got two hits that day and ended the season with a 162 OPS+. He easily won Rookie of the Year honors and finished seventh in the MVP balloting, but the Phillies collapsed at the end of the season, narrowly losing the pennant to the Cardinals.

Despite his great rookie season, Allen's relationship with the team and the fans was not good. He was the first African American Phillies star and whenever he slumped or did not get a hit in a clutch situation he was booed and became the subject of racist jeers. He was a young African American man who had to put up with a lot, but was not the kind of person who kept his anger and frustration bottled up. Allen made little effort to conceal his dissatisfaction, but he just kept hitting. In his six years with the Phillies, from 1964-1969, he posted an OPS+ of 164 while averaging 30 home runs a year. He spent the 1970s with the Cardinals, Dodgers and White Sox and hit wherever he went. He returned to the Phillies in 1975; and in 1976, as part time first baseman and pinch hitter, helped the team back to the post-season for the first

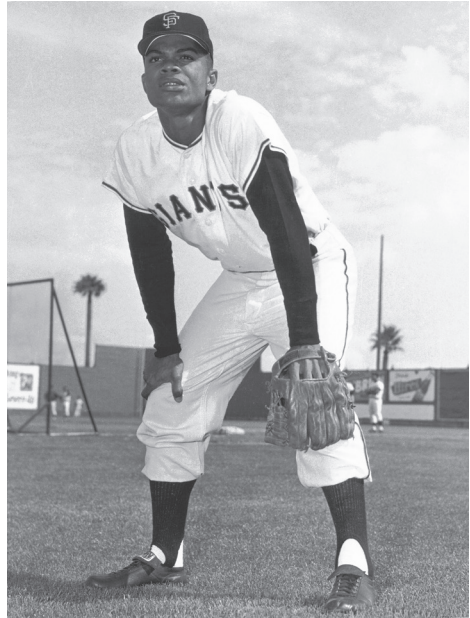
time since 1950. Allen ended his career with the A's the following season.

Allen died in late 2020 and in the years since his retirement has been the subject of a campaign to get him elected to the Hall of Fame. Allen is a border-line Hall of Fame candidate, but there are several Hall of Famers who were not as good on the ballfield as Dick Allen. His reputation has also changed as what 60 years ago was seen as anger and controversy on Allen's part is now understood as the actions a proud young man who had no tolerance for racism. Due to his good looks, seventies hairstyles and panache, Allen has also become something of a symbol of 1970s cool on the baseball diamond.

More importantly, Dick Allen's career forces us to reckon more deeply with the integration of the American and National Leagues. While the racism confronted by Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby and other players of that era is relatively well known, as is the apartheid system in what was then known as Organized Baseball until 1947, the difficulties faced by the next generation is overlooked. These men, including Allen, Bobby Bonds, Dock Ellis, Reggie Jackson, and many others, grew up in the Civil Rights Era and found themselves part of an institution that was still run by white people, many of whom had very little understanding of race in America. Allen bounced around the big leagues, was all but run out of Philadelphia early in his career, and never fully appreciated for his extraordinary baseball abilities and performance because of that dynamic.

Three Felipe Alou

One of the most significant, and best, changes in MLB over the last 65 years or so has been that it has become much more international. There are now players from Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and numerous other countries on big league rosters. No country has contributed more to this globalization than the Dominican Republic. If you want to understand the history of Dominican players in the big leagues, Felipe Alou is a good place to start.



© S. F. Giants

Alou was the second Dominican player to play in the National League, but he was the first big leaguer to have grown up in the Dominican Republic. Ozzie Virgil Sr., who got to the Giants two years before Alou debuted in 1958, was born in the Dominican Republic but grew up in the Bronx. Alou was a very good player, the patriarch of an extensive baseball family, an advocate for Latino ballplayers and the first Dominican manager. Alou was a fixture in MLB for more than half a century. You simply cannot tell the story of the impact of the Dominican Republic on baseball without Felipe Alou.

Felipe Alou was the best of a trio of brothers who all were outfielders and all began their careers with the San Francisco

Giants—the first team to tap the rich vein of great Dominican ballplayers. In addition to being the Giants' conduit to Matty and Jesus Alou, Felipe Alou helped the Giants land the great Dominican pitcher Juan Marichal. Felipe Alou also had two sons, Moises Alou and Luis Rojas, as well as two more distant relatives who also played in the big leagues.

Felipe Alou was an outfielder, a career .286 hitter during his 17-year career with a career OPS+ of 113 despite drawing relatively few walks. He fielded his position well and in a good year could hit between 15 and 30 home runs.

Alou also played a key role in one of the most famous games, and indeed innings, in baseball history.

In 1962, Alou had a great year hitting .316/.356/.513 playing left and right field for the pennant winning Giants. He made the All-Star team and finished 13th in the MVP voting. Despite his 25 home runs, Alou frequently batted leadoff because the Giants middle of the order included Hall of Famers Willie Mays, Willie McCovey, and Orlando Cepeda. In the World Series that year, the Giants trailed the Yankees 1-0 going into the bottom of the ninth inning of game seven. Felipe's brother Matty pinch hit for the pitcher and singled to lead off the inning, bringing up Felipe Alou. Alou was asked to bunt his brother over to second but could not get a good bunt down and struck out. Chuck Hiller then struck out for the second out of the inning. The tying run was now on first base for Willie Mays. Mays hit a double to right, but Matty Alou was held at third base. Had Felipe been able to bunt his brother over to second, Mays would have driven in the tying run. Willie McCovey then lined out to end the game and the World Series. For decades after that, Alou would say that his inability to get that bunt down was a memory that still dogged him.

During those years with the Giants, the Alou brothers, Marichal and the Puerto Rican Cepeda were among the Latino players that made the Giants the most diverse team in baseball. They were changing the game, but not everybody understood or welcomed that. The Giants were a team loaded with stars, but they never put it together and after 1962, did not make it back to the postseason until 1971. Many racists blamed that on the atti-

tude of the Latino players. Alvin Dark, who managed the Giants from 1961-1964 was chief among these racists claiming in 1964 that African American and Latino players were “just not able to perform up to the white ballplayers when it comes to mental alertness.” Dark also tried to ban the Spanish language in the clubhouse, thus barring Felipe, Jesus and Matty Alou from communicating with their own brothers in their shared native language.

In 1963, Alou, along with the progressive sportswriter Arnold Hano wrote an essay for *Sport Magazine* titled “Latin-American Ballplayers Need a Bill of Rights.” This essay drew attention to a number of issues of which many fans and baseball people had been, or chosen to be, unaware and remains a valuable document for understanding the challenges the first generation of Latino players faced. The Giants responded to that article by swapping Alou to the Milwaukee Braves in one of several bad trades the Giants made from the early 1960s through the mid-1970s.

After retiring from play, Alou made it back to the big leagues in 1992 as manager of the Montreal Expos. He stayed there for ten years and later managed the Giants for four years. Today there are numerous great Dominican stars who have had a massive influence on the game. Alou’s career, more than that of any other player, is intertwined with that. Alou did not have a Hall of Fame career as a player, but came close. Similarly, as a manager he was a cut or two below most Hall of Fame managers, but few people have been good players, good managers and had such an impact on the game. If I could add one player to the Hall of Fame, it might just be Felipe Alou