

Willie Mays, R.I.P.

by Earl P. Holt III

So-called *five-tool players* have been rare in professional baseball, but Willie Mays was one of them. He could beat you with his speed on the bases, his power, his consistency at the plate, his glove and his arm. But more than anything, he was to *National League* pitching for two decades what the *Crucifix* is to vampires.

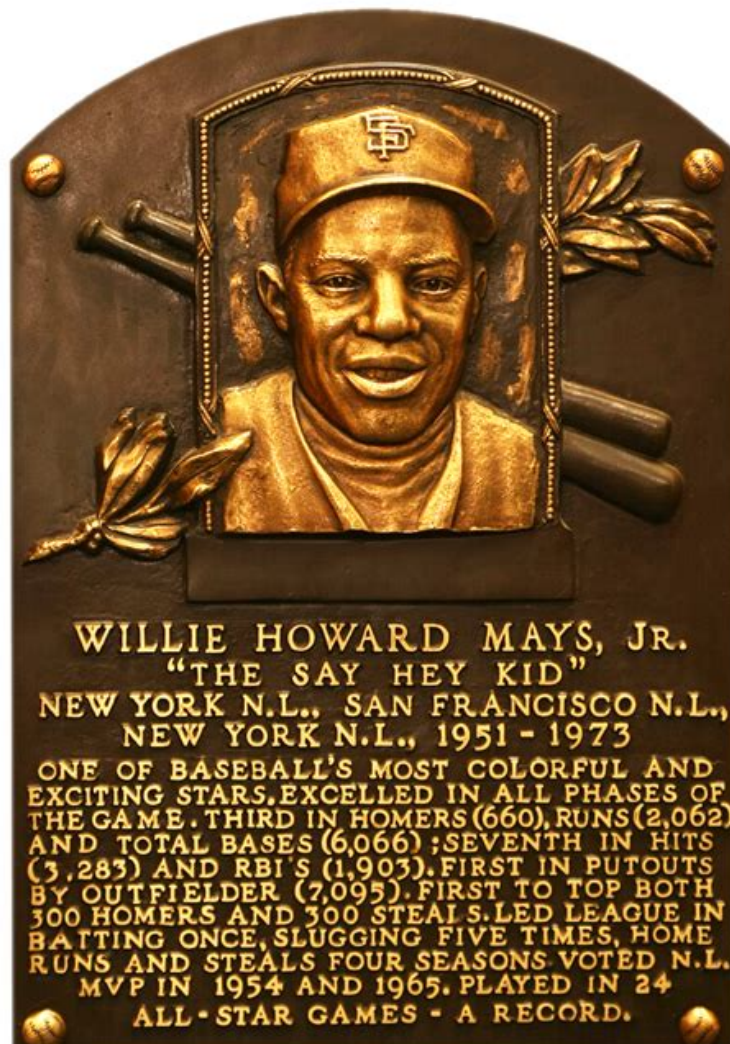
In 1963 when I was 10 or 11 years old, my father took me to a *St. Louis Cardinal* ballgame against the *San Francisco Giants* at **Sportsman's Park** in St. Louis. Mays hit three home runs in that game. I don't remember who was pitching, but until Bob Gibson came along, the *Cardinals* were defenseless against the bat of Willie Mays.



From 1960 until Mays retired in 1973, the *National League* won 14 of the 17 **All Star Games** played, while the *American League* won 2 and one was tied. (In some years two **All Star Games** were played.) Much of the

credit for that unusual streak belongs to Mays. Only during the *All Star Game* did *National League* pitching finally get a reprieve and let American League pitchers share that dubious privilege.

Anyone who fails to include Willie Mays when compiling the **GREATEST BASEBALL TEAM OF ALL-TIME** simply doesn't know baseball. The 660 home runs Mays hit remained the third highest total in history, until anabolic steroids began to intrude on baseball statistics and muddy them forever. The wind blowing in from leftfield at *Candlestick Park* probably kept him from surpassing both Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron in lifetime homers.



In the modern era, Ted Williams was a better hitter, and I've seen former *Cardinal* Jim Edmonds make a number of catches that were more spectacular than what's been called "***the greatest catch ever made***" by Mays in the **1954 World Series**. Mays robbed the *Yankees'* Vic Wertz of a likely game-winning extra-base hit that would have flown well over the head of any other centerfielder in baseball.

However, Ted Williams rarely stole a base and was ambivalent about fielding, while Jim Edmonds was not the hitter that Mays was: being the classy guy his is, Edmonds would probably concede that he didn't have the power or consistency that Mays possessed. That's because very few in ***Major League Baseball*** history ever did.



"THE CATCH"