



## Legendary Sam Hairston first among equals in family honor from scouts' organization

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
Posted Wednesday, January 2, 2013*

When Jerry Hairston, Sr. steps to the podium Jan. 11 at the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles, he'll accept an award for another Hairston who will be very much present in spirit.

Officially, White Sox spring training coach Hairston will accept the Ray Boone Family Award for his kin – brother John and son Jerry, Sr., also scheduled to be in attendance. Only Hairston missing will be younger son Scott, absent due to a previously-scheduled personal commitment. But most of all, the honor bestowed by the Professional Baseball Scout Foundation will honor the memory of a Hairston who was first among equals.

Jerry Hairston, Sr., won't have enough time to truly pay homage to family patriarch Sam Hairston, Sr. In the progeny's view, the award should be about the elder Hairston, because the family has achieved its baseball status because its first big-leaguer's wisdom and leadership. Sam Hairston was the leadoff man of five family members spread over three generations to make the majors, tying the Delahanty brothers (Ed, Frank, Jim, Joe and Tom) for most representatives of one family to play in the big leagues.

Not only have the Hairstons kept one big leaguer ahead of the Bell and Boone families – each with four major leaguers over three generations – but they also have a firm, historic place in Chicago baseball history.



**A three-generation photo from early 1978 in winter ball in Mexico. Sam Hairston proudly poses with son Jerry, Sr., then a big leaguer, and grandson Jerry, Jr. not even 2 yet. At the time, Sam Hairston correctly predicted Jerry, Jr. would make the big leagues (Photo courtesy of Jerry Hairston, Sr.).**

On July 21, 1951 at old Comiskey Park, Sam Hairston became the first African-American player on the Sox, 3 ½ months after Minnie Minoso, a black Cuban, broke the team's color line. Sam also was the first Sox black catcher. Interestingly, John Hairston, one of Sam's three sons, played 4 ½ innings as the Cubs' first black catcher, starting the season finale on Oct. 2, 1969 at Wrigley Field.

Sam Hairston went on to become one of the most beloved Sox organizational figures in team history. He signed with the Sox on July 31, 1950 from the Indianapolis Clowns of the Negro League, after putting up numbers to qualify for the league's Triple Crown (.424, 17 homers, 71 RBIs in 70 games). Sam would go on to spend 48 seasons in the Sox organization. After his four-game stint with the '51 Sox, he served as an award-winning minor-leaguer, scout and father-confessor coach until his death at 77 on Oct. 31, 1977. His Sox career spanned the 1973-77 and 1981-89 service of Jerry Hairston, Sr. as a South Side outfielder and skilled pinch hitter.

### **A Hairston with the Sox since 1950**

"Since 1950, there's been a Hairston on the Sox payroll," said Jerry Sr.

Meanwhile, Jerry Hairston, Jr. made it two family members wearing Cubs pinstripes, playing both the middle infield and outfield in 2005-06, having come over with Mike Fontenot from Baltimore in the Sammy Sosa trade. Only the youngest MLB Hairston, outfielder Scott, hasn't yet donned a Chicago uniform. Give him time, though.

Scott had enough of a Chicago-area connection, though, to keep the family's post-Birmingham (Sam Hairston's hometown) roots firmly in the Second City. After Jerry, Sr. moved his young family from Alsip to Lisle to Bolingbrook and to Palos Hills, he finally settled in 1983 in Naperville. Jerry, Jr. and Scott became prep baseball stars at Naperville North, before Jerry, Jr. played college ball at Southern Illinois University. Scott finished out his senior year in the Tucson area to make transition to a local college easier. His father soon followed him to the southern Arizona desert and has lived there ever since, coaching in the Sox minor-league system or in spring training.

A sixth Hairston could have made the majors, according to Jerry, Jr., keenly aware of family history.

"My grandfather's eldest son Sam, Jr., (a middle infielder) didn't get a chance to play because he was in service in Vietnam," he said.

The family's legacy, from the Negro Leagues of the Forties to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is more than enough for the scouts' honor. But all emotional roads will lead back to Sam Hairston when Jerry Sr. takes his bows to accept "by far (the best award) we've received as a family, and me personally. It's fantastic."

Commanding the lectern will be an opportunity for Jerry, Sr. to inform those who don't already know the Sam Hairston story. He'll be supplemented in the historical track by Jerry, Jr. and John Hairston on site.

“It’s not about us,” Jerry Sr. said. “It’s about my dad. That was his dream, to not only play the game for himself and make it to the major leagues, but build a career as a player and then go into coaching, do something he dearly loved. No one can even explain or make it real as to how much my dad loved this game, how much he treasured it. To provide for his family, but also to enjoy his life.

“I wish he was alive to witness this. He was one of the pioneers, coming from the Negro Leagues. He was in the major leagues for a short stint, then continued as a scout and coach. And then being able to pass down that legacy. He could tell stories about Roy Campanella, Jackie Robinson, Don Newcombe, Double-Duty Radcliffe. He caught Satchel Paige in (Negro League) All-Star Games. He did barnstorming and all that kind of stuff.”

Heading into his 16<sup>th</sup> big-league season as an infielder/outfielder with the Dodgers , his ninth team, Jerry Hairston, Jr., 36, now defers to his father as family leader, and trusts him to put his grandfather’s legacy into perspective.

“Obviously my father will take the lead and I don’t override that,” he said. “If asked to say a few words, I will.”

### **Humbled as a family for award**

If asked, Jerry Jr. would say much of the following:

“We’re extremely humbled as a family. It’s tremendous. We’re not the Griffey’s, we’re not the Bonds. We’re not overly blessed with a whole lot of talent, but we love going to the ballpark every day – that’s the type of players we were, and are. I remember my father saying, it’s easy to get to big leagues, it’s 10 times as hard to stay. To play at that level, to play this long I’ve been truly blessed.”

The concept of the Ray Boone award is further enhanced due to the passing down of values through each Hairston generation.

“I don’t look at it from a personal standpoint,” said 32-year-old outfielder Scott Hairston. “I’m the youngest Hairston. When I think of this award, I think of my grandfather and my dad and my brother. Without them, I wouldn’t come near to what I’ve become.”

At this writing, Scott Hairston was a free agent after being the first family member to reach the 20-homer mark in 2012 with the Mets, his fourth team. The Cubs apparently kicked the tires on his services earlier in the off-season. But Hairston has had no further contact with the North Siders ever since.

Success in or out of baseball is a mindset, one that Sam Hairston developed for himself as a leader in Jim Crow-drenched Birmingham, Ala. The patriarch learned to persevere through discrimination and obstacles. Patience was his virtue. By the time Michael Jordan played in 1994 with the Birmingham Barons, the Sox’s Double-A Southern League affiliate, Sam Hairston was on hand as a revered elder statesman of baseball,

his scouting and coaching feats long established.

“He came from a humble background,” John Hairston said of his father, the oldest of 14 children. “He was the measuring stick or the touchstone to cause people in the family to do things to improve themselves. He used to always instill in us to go to school. By him not having a formal education, he felt it would be a stumbling block if you did not make it in baseball.”

“He was the person who would take you out and throw balls to you. He was a great father. I don’t care what was doing. If you needed something, he was right there to give it you. It was there the next day. He never refused to help, not only us, but everyone in the community. He would come up to the high school every year before spring training and work with the team. We had the best baseball team in the state of Alabama.”

The Hairstons plowed ahead, not letting distractions take away from improving themselves. John Hairston was in school, watching warily from a distance as Bull Connor’s public-safety thugs loosed fire hoses and dogs on civil-right demonstrators in Birmingham in the spring of 1963. Education was the way upward, in and out of baseball.

### **John Hairston virtually ignored by Durocher in ’69 callup**

Like his father, John Hairston was a minor-league success. He batted over .400 in Aug. 1969 at Tacoma, the Cubs’ Triple-A affiliate. But manager Leo Durocher hardly used Hairston to help his collapsing team when he was called up in September.

All the while, several of Hairston’s coaches suggested he could be managerial material, based on ability and the leadership skills his college education boosted. The reality of an African-American manager was drawing near in 1969. Hairston, though, never got a chance to follow through due to injuries that cut short his playing career in his late 20s. Desiring stability, Hairston went into teaching in Portland, Ore. He is now retired, living near Tacoma.

He wasn’t the only Hairston to take advantage of what was available as Jim Crow died off.

“No matter what you do in life, be very hard-working,” said Jerry Hairston, Jr. “Just be a success. With my cousins, one’s an engineer, another’s an athletic director. My grandfather always stressed be a good person.”

And be the best at your job, even if it isn’t your final goal. With the Sox at once so close and yet so far, Sam Hairston Sr. became the most popular player at Colorado Springs in the Western League. He was the league MVP in 1953, then won the batting title with .350 in 1955. Grateful fans staged a “Sam Hairston Night,” presenting him with a brand-new Pontiac, which the honoree kept 11 years. The successor Colorado Springs team retired his number in 1993.

“He was an ambassador for that little city,” John Hairston said of Colorado Springs.

### **Sam Hairston predicted Jerry, Jr.’s big-league days**

And a man who could see into the future. Jerry Hairston, Jr. wasn't even 2 yet when he showed natural baseball athleticism. Spying such budding talent while his grandson accompanied his father in winter ball in Mexico early in 1978, Sam Hairston predicted Jerry Jr. would make it to the majors. He commissioned a three-generation photo of himself, his son and grandson, displayed with this article. Sam Hairston died less than a year before his prediction came true. Jerry Hairston, Jr. was called up to the Orioles at the end of the 1998 season.

The family story is compelling. More than 20 years ago, Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf suggested a book be compiled on Sam Hairston and his baseball heirs – long before the third generation was ready to play in the majors. A book would be a fascinating baseball history, given that Sam Hairston left behind copious written material and other memorabilia on his life and times.

The Ray Boone Award should only be the first of a series of awards for the family. The Chicago Baseball Museum will campaign for the Hairstons to be honored in Chicago, where the family's impact was greatest.

“What our family has accomplished is truly because of him,” Jerry Hairston, Sr. said. “It was just his love of the game. It was infectious and we caught it. Before I had my kids, he allowed me to learn the game, but also build my own personal desire. That's the way I dealt with my children. Play the game and enjoy it, then walk away.

“Throw me one more pop fly, hit me one more ground ball. Walk away. Leave that practice wanting more.”