



Aaron won't ever forget his 'homer that wasn't' in Holtzman's no-hitter

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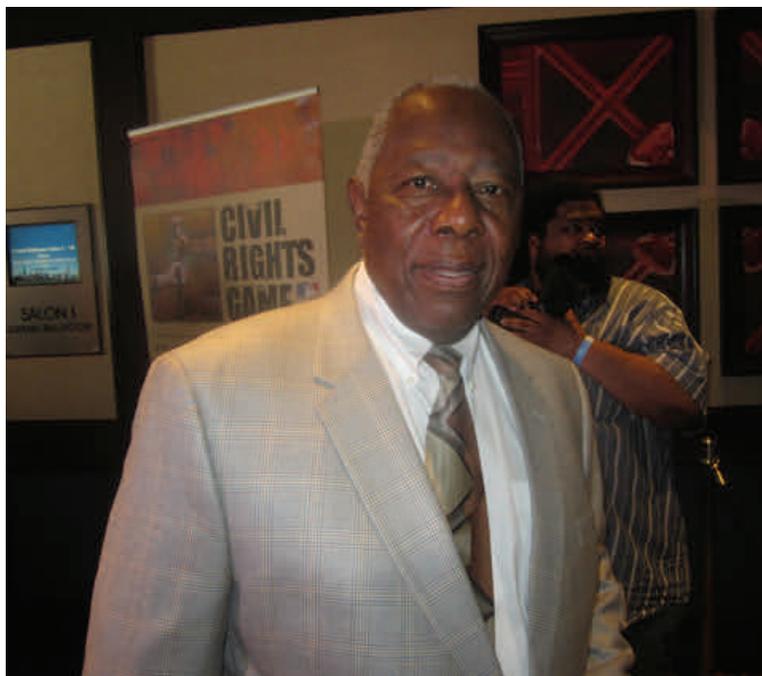
How in the world can you pitch a no-hitter without a strikeout?

That's 27 batted balls ending up as outs.

Something really fluky had to happen.

You guessed right.

On Aug. 19, 1969, the Cubs' Ken Holtzman hurled the first of his two career no-no's at the Atlanta Braves in front of an overflow 41,000 at Wrigley Field. By all logic, Holtzman, throwing almost exclusively fastballs that afternoon, should have lost the no-hitter in the seventh.



Hank Aaron was in Chicago for the Civil Rights Game festivities.

Hank Aaron connected on what should have boosted his 1969 home total in the end to 45 and his career mark to 756. The ball literally passed over the left-field bleachers.

But Aaron's blast, and it can't be called anything but, ended up cradled in Billy Williams' glove in the little alcove where the left-field wall curves near what was then the end of the bleachers. Reprieved, Holtzman would nurse his hitless gem until two out in the ninth when he'd face the same dilemma as in the seventh – getting Aaron out.

The "home run that wasn't" story came to life recently when Aaron, now 79, graced the Civil Rights Game at U.S. Cellular Field, the roundtable discussion about civil rights in the game at the Chicago Cultural Center and the pre-game lunch at the downtown Mar-

riott. At 79, Aaron doesn't do many interviews. In this instance, just before the lunch, he was entertaining and brought one of Chicago's seminal baseball events back to life.

WGN-TV production director Bob Vorwald is assembling interviews for an April 2014 special commemorating Wrigley Field's 100th birthday. He asked Aaron if he'd still like to grab a bat when the wind blows out at Clark and Addison. Hammering Hank laughed, and then remembered a sunny, 75-degree afternoon when the wind blew in against him like never before.

Thwarted HR 'hardest ball' Aaron ever hit

"The thing I remember the most about playing at Wrigley Field is hitting probably the hardest ball I've ever hit in my life off Kenny Holtzman when he pitched a no-hitter," Aaron said. "I thought for sure I hit a home run. Sure enough, the wind blew it back to Billy Williams."

Someone suggested the Bleacher Bums blew it back in. No, this was an act of Mother Nature. Or maybe even higher powers, considering how witnesses described it. Certainly, on the TV call, Jack Brickhouse momentarily gave up on the blast and the no-hitter until fate intervened.



Hank Aaron was nicknamed "Bad Henry" by ace pitchers who feared him.

Cubs closer Phil Regan, witnessing the drive from the left-field bullpen, said the ball actually passed over several bleacher rows before making a "left turn" when it hit the wall of wind. And Williams always knew not to give up on a ball when the gales blew in. He retreated into the vines in the well. On TV, it appeared as if the ball dropped straight down into Williams' glove.

Aaron was, and is, perplexed.

"It was out of the ballpark," he recalled. "I don't know how it stayed in the ballpark. Somehow it came back and ran in that little trough where Billy ended up catching the ball."

Aaron would have the last word against Holtzman, though. He came up again with two out in the ninth. Holtzman pumped another fastball plateward. Aaron grounded to Glenn Beckert at second, who was so nervous he nearly fell to his knees. Beckert recovered his composure and threw to Ernie Banks at first to complete the feat.

"The most ironic thing about that day is I made the final out," Aaron said. "So Kenny Holtzman was not afraid to pitch to me. He came right back and got me out for the last out."

Platoons of pitchers throughout the decades would have killed to have benefited from both the good fortune and the results of Aug. 19, 1969.

A player without weaknesses

“He had no weaknesses, he really didn’t,” said Dick Ellsworth, the last Cubs lefty to win 20 games, back in 1963, when Aaron had a National League-leading 44 homers and 130 RBIs in a pitcher’s year.

“If you wanted to keep the ball in ballpark, with runners on base, the big decision was to pitch to him or not,” said Ellsworth, now a real-estate executive in Fresno, Calif. “He was a very tough hitter to strike him out. You hope you could keep it on the ground. You wanted to keep it on the ground. He was especially tough against left-handers.”



Two Georgians, Jimmy Carter and Hank Aaron, compare notes about being in the limelight at the White House in 1978.

Playing in smaller-market Milwaukee and Atlanta all but two of his 23-season career, Aaron never got the publicity for being a complete player.

“He was one of the most underrated defensive outfielders in the game,” Ellsworth said. “Everyone talks about Willie Mays, and he was a great ball-player. Hank Aaron was more sound fundamentally. He never made a mistake. He had a good arm.”

That Wrigley wind taketh, and it also giveth...

“I can believe it,” said Ellsworth. “I broke Johnny Callison’s bat, but the wind was blowing out, and he hit the ball out. Another time, Del Crandall lunged at a curveball low and outside. The wind’s blowing out. He hit it out. He rounded first base, shrugged at me and gestured, ‘What can I do?’”

Aaron’s thwarted tater against Holtzman came four years before his celebrated chase of Babe Ruth’s all-time home-run record. The chase came through Chicago in Aug. 1973, and he did not disappoint. Amid the hoopla and a nation that was largely supportive, he also had to confront the usual racially-tinged hate mail. The FBI watched over his family.

So in commemorating Jackie Robinson’s breaking the color line in 1947, Aaron was asked if his journey through the negatives compared at all with Robinson’s.

Just a ‘tidbit’ of what Jackie endured

“I just went through a little tidbit of what Jackie went through,” Aaron said. “Jackie had some tough times and I realized that. I happened to play against him the last three

years he played. He had probably the toughest of all. I had nothing. All I had to do is walk out there, hit a baseball and go back in somewhere and hide, then come back out the next day and hit a baseball.”

At the time, Aaron experienced some stress. From the vantage point of four decades, he enjoyed the journey.

“No question about it, I had a wonderful time,” he said. “I did some of it here in Chicago. I hit some home runs in Chicago. What I think about is the trials and tribulations Jackie Robinson went through. For me to come back and break a record like the one Babe Ruth held for such a long time, was one that showed everybody, if given the same opportunity to play this game, we (African-Americans) too can do the same thing.”

Now, he wonders why more African Americans don’t take advantage of the opportunity Robinson fought for, and his own generation of players were accorded with a lot of caveats – the hate mail and informal quotas on total number of black players on each team.

“If we look at the percentage of African Americans playing baseball today vs. African Americans playing baseball when I played, it has gone down tremendously,” Aaron said. “It’s a complicated issue. The commissioner’s trying to figure it out. I’m trying to figure it out. I don’t know why we don’t play baseball the way we did a few years ago.”

Kenny Williams, the Sox’s executive vice president, said at the roundtable discussion baseball should provide its ballparks as hosts to youth games so minorities can enjoy the kind of “glitz” that football and basketball, draining away the talent base, typically provide. Aaron agreed.

“I think anything we can do that can improve and let minorities know we want them to play baseball, we need to do it no matter what it is,” he said.

Education before baseball

But he also concurred with Williams that only a small fraction of potential players would ever get paid to play baseball. Thus educational opportunities must be easily available for those who never make the cut.



Ken Holtzman, shown here early in his Oakland stint in 1972, pitched a rare no-hitter without a strikeout, in large part thanks to Hank Aaron.

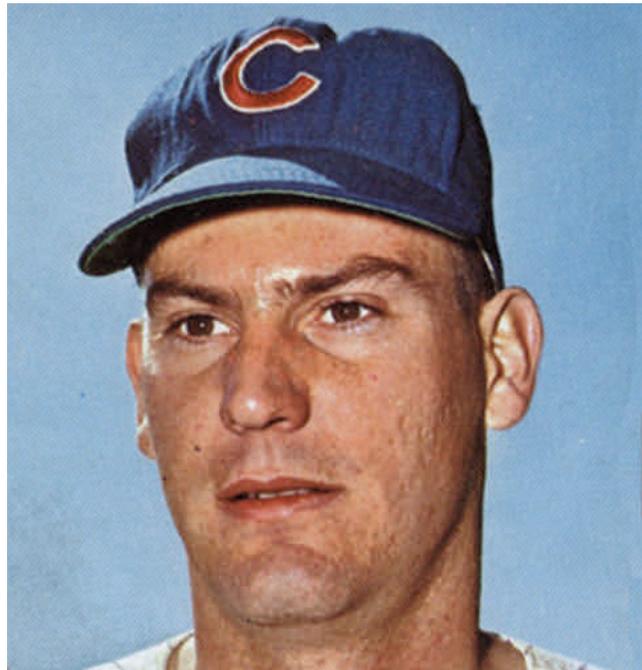
“The only thing I can tell (youths) is that in spite of all of my success (in baseball), some of them never probably will play baseball,” Aaron said. “We need to think about baseball second, and education first. That’s what I would tell them.”

Aaron’s own home-run record was likely broken through the use of performance enhancing drugs. Yet he believes the sheer numbers were not the motivation for the ballooned-up players juicing.

“I don’t think it’s the numbers,” Aaron said. “I think it’s a matter of them having great years and signing big contracts. I don’t think hitting more home runs than I hit and breaking the records. Trying to make a lot of money and (being influenced by) these agents.”

PEDs continue to plague baseball despite a stringent testing system. Aaron does not believe Commissioner Bud Selig can tighten the screws significantly more on the violators.

“I think he’s doing a great job,” he said. “In spite of all the things that have happened the last few weeks, I don’t know of anything else he can do. He can’t put these guys to bed. He can only lay the rules down, the possibility of them being suspended.”



Dick Ellsworth was another lefty who knew how much Holtzman had dodged the bullet in getting Hank Aaron out.

Baseball is always both joy and sorrow. At least Hank Aaron had the days when his biggest worry was that fickle wind blowing in off Waveland Avenue, not whether the man who displaced him as all-time home-run king was tainted.