

Willie Mays

Baseball great Willie Mays was born May 6, 1931. He grew up in Westfield, Alabama. He learned how to play baseball from his father, who worked in a steel mill. Mays' father played on a semiprofessional team that the mill sponsored. By the time the younger Mays was 14, he had joined his father on the mill team.

Within two years, Willie Mays was playing professional baseball with the Birmingham Black Barons, a team in the segregated Negro Southern League. The first year that Mays played for the Barons, his parents insisted that he play only in home games so that he wouldn't miss any school.

The day Mays graduated from high school, the New York Giants signed him. Mays spent a short time playing with the Giants' Class B farm team in Trenton, New Jersey, and then quickly advanced to their AAA team, the Minneapolis Millers. In 1951, when Mays was just 20, he got the call to come to New York as a centerfielder.

Mays went hitless in his first 12 times at bat in the major leagues, but then broke his hitless streak with a home run over the left-field roof. Mays went another 13 at-bats before he got his second major league hit. He eventually became more consistent. By the end of his first season, he had hit another 19 home runs.

The Giants' franchise moved from New York to San Francisco in 1958. In 1964, Mays became team captain. He was a true team leader. He broke up a fight between two players who were going after each other with bats, and he helped defuse a potentially explosive situation that occurred when the team manager made racially insensitive remarks to a reporter.

