

Monday Marks 50 Years Since Aaron's 715th Home Run

by Tom Emery
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Hank Aaron's 715th home run remains a seminal moment in American sports history. An Illinois State University alum was a pitcher of record in the game.

Monday (April 8) marks the 50th anniversary of the moment, when Aaron smashed Babe Ruth's career home run mark. But there was still a game to be played, amid the spectacle.

Buzz Capra, a righthander who had played on the 1969 Illinois State squad that captured the NCAA Division II national title, came on in relief for Atlanta to start the seventh inning with the Braves leading the Dodgers 7-4. Capra was at his sharpest, tossing three scoreless innings with six strikeouts to earn the save.

Aaron's home run chase had captured the nation in late 1973 and early 1974. He hit number 713 in the second-to-last game of the 1973 season, and had to wait for another chance at the record.

It was years later, however, before the public knew the horrors of the chase for Aaron. He received 930,000 pieces of mail in 1973, more than any non-politician in the United States. While many were supportive, there was plenty of racist hate mail with chilling threats.

Even supporters of Aaron were blasted with hate mail. In 1973, cartoonist Charles Schultz drew the home run chase into the *Peanuts* comic strip, only to be deluged with negative mail. The executive editor of the *Atlanta Journal* received countless phone calls with racial epithets for the sportswriters.

Aaron, who is remembered today for his dignified nature, wrote years later that "I resented it, and I still resent it. It should have been the most enjoyable time of my life, and instead it was hell. I'm proud of the home run record, but I don't talk about it because it brings back too many unpleasant memories."

That same season of 1973 was the third in the majors for Capra, who had been a high school star at Lane Tech in Chicago before his stardom at Illinois State. Capra made his big league debut with three appearances for the Mets in 1971.

He split the 1972 and 1973 seasons between the majors and the Mets' Class AAA farm team at Tidewater. Capra pitched in a combined 38 games over those two seasons, with a 5-9 record and four saves. New York won the National League pennant in 1973, but Capra did not see action in the postseason.

Capra was sold to the Braves during spring training in 1974, and was expected to pitch in relief that year. His first two appearances just happened to be in the games when Aaron tied, and then broke, Ruth's record. And Capra was a pitcher of record in both.

In the season opener at Cincinnati on April 4, Capra came out of the bullpen and took the loss as the Braves fell 7-6 in eleven innings. Earlier in that game, Aaron tied Ruth's record with his 714th home run.

The suspense of the home run chase continued for two more games (Aaron was not in the lineup on April 6). On April 8, Atlanta hosted the Los Angeles Dodgers in the Braves' home opener, and Aaron drew a walk in his first at-bat in the second inning.

With one on and no out in the fourth, Aaron blasted a 1-0 pitch over the left field wall for the 715th home run of his career. Aaron's parents came onto the field after the homer, and his mother gave him a long embrace, not letting go – because she feared someone would try to shoot him.

Atlanta led 7-4 after six innings when Capra came on in relief. The ISU grad was at his sharpest, as he shut down the Dodgers for the rest of the night. Capra struck out five of the first six batters he faced, including three in the seventh. A two-out walk in the seventh was Capra's only baserunner of the night.

He proceeded to send the Dodgers down 1-2-3 in both the eighth and ninth innings to earn the save in a 7-4 Atlanta win. Capra finished with six strikeouts in three innings of work.

It was the first of many highlights for Capra in the 1974 season, who moved to the Atlanta starting rotation in May. That spring, he set a franchise record by going 26 innings without allowing an earned run.

In June, Capra went 6-0 with a 1.05 ERA and three shutouts, earning National League Player of the Month honors. The Braves sent three members to the All-Star game in July; Aaron, right fielder Ralph Garr, and Capra.

Capra finished the season with a 16-8 record while leading the majors with a 2.28 earned-run average. Unfortunately, his career was derailed by injuries from there, and he appeared in just seventeen games for the Braves over the 1975 and 1976 seasons. He pitched in 45 games, mostly in relief, for Atlanta in 1977, his last in the majors.

After Capra's career ended, he came back to Illinois State as the Redbirds' pitching coach before a lengthy run as a minor league coach and manager. In 1986, Capra was inducted into the Illinois State Athletics Percy Hall of Fame as part of the Redbirds' 1969 national title squad.

Henry Aaron left Atlanta after the 1974 season and returned to Milwaukee, the Braves' home until 1965. There, he spent his last two seasons in the majors with the Brewers, retiring in 1976.

He still holds the all-time MLB records for career RBI, extra-base hits, and total bases. A 25-time All-Star, Aaron ranks third on the all-time hit list with 3,771, trailing only Ty Cobb and Pete Rose.

Incredibly, he would have still had over 3,000 hits without counting a single one of his home runs. Aaron died in January 2021.

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