



Sports

by Jerry Keys

I heard it so many times I wanted to scream. The same story over and over again. Parents imagine having a migraine and your teenage child asking, "Can't I go, can't I go?" eleven times in one breath. A younger cousin went to a baseball game and met a player.

Over the summer he attended an Atlanta Braves game and met Chipper Jones. Well...he did not exactly "meet" Chipper, he screamed (and he has a pair of lungs), "Heeeeey Chipah you're the best man!" From what he could decipher Chipper returned the praise by saying something along the lines of, "Hey there kid, I hope you enjoy the game." It made his summer. He was on cloud nine. An All-Star third baseman spoke to him.

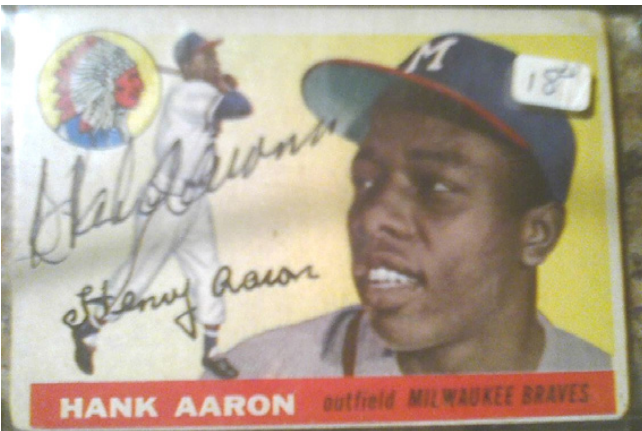
I was not impressed by it at all but being old enough to be his father, I went along with it and said all the "oh wow," "how awesome," and "that was so cool." Chipper began his career with Atlanta when my cousin was not even one-year-old.

Later that night, I found myself drifting back, as we all seem to do more and more after we turn 35. I thought I should have been happy for him. Chipper was his hero. Not too many years ago I was him (well ok, maybe more than a few years). I believed in heroes of the diamond. It seemed like yesterday it was me at the edge of the stands screaming for Dale Murphy to sign a baseball or a baseball card! Back when the summer nights would never end and my parents had just purchased cable television!

After feeling extremely bad for partially ignoring his moment of glory, I helped him begin a baseball card collection of Chipper. There are several other

players he likes from Atlanta, therefore I showed him how he could purchase team sets (rather than player-by-player because team sets are cheaper). The more I helped him explore card collecting and following the career of active players, the more I could not help dwelling back 25 years.

My thoughts ran back to the 1982 Braves who shocked the world by winning the pennant, how every pack I opened was an adventure within itself. In those days, it was Topps, Fleer, and Donruss. In those days, packs were 30 cents



and the place I traded at would offer a special of "four packs for \$1" often. If I saved any of my lunch money or did chores, my mom or dad would stop by a place called "Cross-Eyed Cricket."



Hank's last Topps card was 1976, he did not have a 1977 card made.

The Cricket was beside the old mall (currently Life Care Headquarters) and the old Hardees (currently right across the street beside

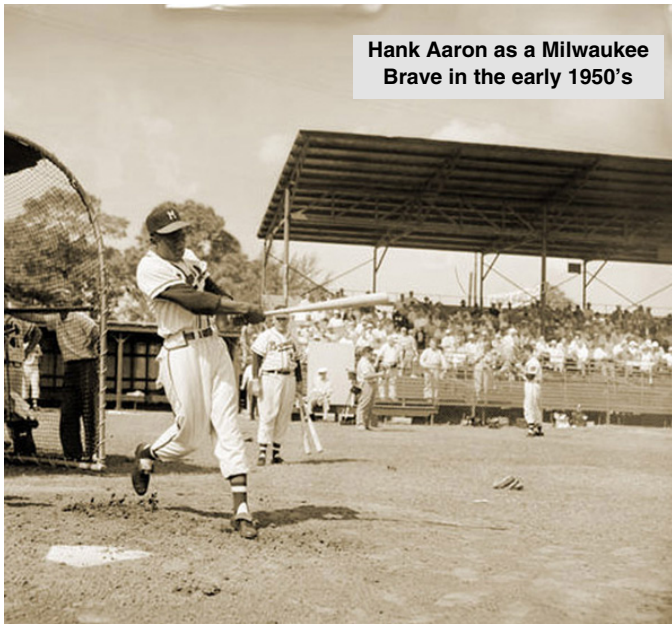
Tractor Supply). If I am not mistaken, a man named Danny Poole owned this establishment right about the time I started collecting cards. I was still in elementary school (5th grade) when I would gaze at the cards in the glass shelves. Mr. Poole and another adult male were talking about a new star on the rise. They were debating on what the card was worth and what it should be sold at (this was pre-Beckett days). Being a goofy kid I said, "What about \$3?" Both laughed and said, "This kid is not a star yet." The card was a 1982 Topps Orioles Future Stars #21 Cal Ripken. What all three of us would give to purchase as many as we

could today at \$3 each! A couple years later, when I attended Bradley Junior High School, I was caught chewing gum in Mr. Wright's science class. Mr. Wright would have you write pages out of the science book as punishment for breaking a school rule. I was very upset and refused to complete my assignments for that period. As the day progressed, I was told I was to go to the office. I had no idea what for but when I thought back to not attempting to do my assignments, my mind raced. Maybe I would get detention, maybe a paddling, or worse, the principal call my parents. When

I arrived at the office, my mother was there. I felt the minutes of my life now numbered (grin).

I was sped away by my

Some Still Call Him "The King"



Hank Aaron as a Milwaukee Brave in the early 1950's

parents and taken straight to the house. My mother then told me to go and get my baseball and Hank Aaron baseball card. I then learned we were going to meet the Home Run King. My mother's boss at the time received a tip there was a news conference about to take place at the Holiday Inn South (currently the gigantic fireworks store at exit 20). And Hank was to be interviewed by certain reporters in a hotel room/make-shift newsroom.

We arrived moments before the news crew set up the cameras. The day was February 11, 1985 and Aaron was to speak at an Old Timers Banquet later in the day. My mother and I stood in the background as

question. I also felt my mother's hand bring mine down quite effectively.

After the conference was over, I was able to meet Hank and shake his hand. He signed a baseball and a baseball card. The baseball card was a 1955 Topps card. Mr. Poole had the very card in his display case in 1983 for \$18. I had \$10 saved up from mowing yards that summer ('83) and my dad said he would spot the extra \$8 as long as I promised to wash the cars come spring. I agreed and obtained the card. This was the card Hank signed.

As I was walking through the parking lot, a reporter asked what I had him sign and I showed him the card. The reporter said that card



The King is not dead!

reporters asked questions about Atlanta's upcoming spring training. Being the idiotic person I was at the time, I raised my hand for a

may be worth something someday. Little did he know, it already was...to me. Aaron's 1955 Topps #47 today is valued at \$450

and with his personal signature... estimated at \$600. All 1955 Topps cards had a stamped on autograph so the card Aaron signed has two. I still have the card and do not think I could ever sell it. It is something I will pass down generation-to-generation.

After reliving that moment, I felt terrible about ignoring my cousin's experience with Chipper. It is so easy to downgrade something in a younger relative's life which is very special to them just because you are old enough to realize, ballplayers are not heroes. I take that back, to me Hank Aaron will always be a hero in my eyes.

As we grow older, we realize and accept life for what it is. We no longer see the world through a child's eyes... untainted, innocent, protected. Although as an adult, I (and many others) change things we can and accept things we can not but we lose that childhood viewpoint. Most adults who develop a passion for anything must have a motivating theme to ignite it, whereas a child can develop passion without cause or reason.

After some thought, I was jealous of my cousin. He may love baseball until he is 104. He may be similar to me and start seeing the game for what it is as he grows older. Every adult at times wishes they could return to the days of innocence. These wishes can not come true but you can recapture it by simply looking in the eyes of your child or young relative.

As a side note, I ran into Mr. Wright exactly twenty years later. He remembered me by my distorted grin. I saw him in a totally different light. I have heard from veteran and retired teachers it is wonderful to see students they taught 15-20-25 years ago. What they do not realize, it means more to the once-students that they are remembered.