



It's good to be the King

Thirty years after breaking baseball's home run record, Hank Aaron is building a new reputation in the business world.

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They say you couldn't sneak a fastball past Hank Aaron. Apparently you can't sneak a crate of chicken past him either.

Not long after Aaron opened his first Church's Chicken franchise in Atlanta's West End, he took a seat in the dining room to study the operation, much as he used to study pitchers from the on-deck circle. He noticed an employee toting crates of uncooked poultry to a truck. He took another look and it hit him: That man's stealing my chicken!

"What," Aaron thought, "have I gotten myself into now?"

He can afford to chuckle as he tells the story now, a decade later, over coffee at a new Krispy Kreme doughnut shop around the corner from that Church's. They're both part of his 755 Restaurant Corp., which owns 19 fast-food outlets in Georgia and the Carolinas, with more on the way. He's also the majority partner in six auto dealerships, which he oversees from his office at Hank Aaron BMW and Mini in Union City.

As he prepares to celebrate his 70th birthday Thursday, the most famous athlete in Atlanta history says that he feels less like an old ballplayer than a businessman hitting his stride.

"To be honest with you, I was scared when I retired from baseball," Aaron says. "I wasn't sure I was ever going to make good money again."

So what kind of money is he worth now?

"A little," Aaron says. "I couldn't say how much."

His sly smile indicates it's good to be the home run king.

Aaron concedes that he made some expensive mistakes along the road to prosperity --- including a near bankruptcy years ago --- but he learned from every stumble, just as he used to learn from his strikeouts. In some ways, friends say, his business successes have been as satisfying for him as his playing career.

"I think Hank has enjoyed the last 20 years of his life as much as he enjoyed baseball," says the man who got him into restaurants, Frank Belatti, chairman of AFC Enterprises, the parent company of Church's and Popeyes chicken. "Hank wanted to be known for something besides hitting a baseball. He wanted to be respected as an entrepreneur."

On Thursday night, 150 of Aaron's friends and associates will gather to celebrate his latest milestone at a private dinner. The guest of honor has changed a little in the 30 years since he broke Babe Ruth's career home run record.

The feared hitter Sandy Koufax once called "Bad Henry" goes by a different nickname these days; to his five grandchildren, he's Pa-Pa. He wears glasses now and takes medication for his blood pressure. Though he works to stay in shape, he's thicker around the middle, carrying about 30 pounds more than his playing weight of 185. When Billye Aaron, his wife of three decades, suggested he join her on

the South Beach Diet, he resisted. He does try to avoid fried foods, having decided Satchel Paige was right: They "anger up" the blood.

"He's mellowed a great deal," Billye Aaron says of her husband. "It's amazing how his interests have changed. I think he would have enjoyed business earlier, but the opportunities didn't come."

Aaron occasionally talks about retiring and wants to spend more time at the couple's second home on a golf course in West Palm Beach, Fla. He does fewer speaking engagements and baseball memorabilia shows because he doesn't enjoy traveling as much as he used to. Yet he still keeps a schedule that would tire a man half his age.

When Aaron's in town, his routine begins well before 6 a.m. as he leaves the large brick home he built 30 years ago on a lake in southwest Atlanta. He heads to Turner Field for a pre-dawn workout in the players' weight room. As a senior vice president with the Braves, he keeps an office there, but baseball claims less of his attention nowadays.

"I could see them needing me more at spring training this year because of the cutback in payroll," Aaron says. "They're going to have more kids down there, and some of them are thirsty for advice. But some of the players these days, they walk in with a suitcase full of money and a cellphone against their head --- I can't tell them anything."

Aaron, the best-paid player in baseball near the end of his career, never made more than \$240,000 a year. Texas Rangers slugger Alex Rodriguez makes more than that in two games.

After his workout --- at least 30 minutes on the treadmill, followed by weightlifting --- Aaron showers and dresses in a double-breasted checked suit. He hops into his navy blue BMW 745 sedan, walkie-talkie in hand, and drives past a couple of his properties. First stop: the Krispy Kreme he opened 1 1/2 years ago in the West End to replace a time-worn shop down the street.

"I am very proud of this place," Aaron says, taking a booth near the "Hot Doughnuts Now" sign in the window. "I'm proud because we built it on this side of town. There was talk about moving it. People want nice things here just like they want in Buckhead or anywhere else."

Margaret Wolfe, who has worked at the shop and its predecessor for 27 years, is grateful it stayed in the neighborhood. "I get Mr. Aaron his coffee every morning," she says. He knows that she just turned 73 and has arthritis.

Aaron orders a doughnut --- they bring him two --- and settles in to talk about what he's learned about business. It isn't complicated: hire good people, sweat the details, be patient, deal only with those who earn your trust. As he speaks, he's constantly interrupted by well-wishers who want to shake his hand or ask for an autograph. Whenever such intrusions irritate him, he recalls a woman at the airport pointing him out to her daughter.

"That's Hank Aaron," she said.

"I thought he was dead," the little girl replied.

"I'd rather have people see me sitting here like an ordinary Joe than have them wonder if I'm still alive," Aaron said with a laugh.

Owning a business was the furthest thing from Aaron's mind when he was growing up in Mobile. One of eight children, the son of a dockworker, all he cared about was playing baseball --- especially after he heard about Jackie Robinson.

Aaron left Mobile in 1952, at 18, and signed for \$200 a month with the Indianapolis Clowns of the Negro leagues. Fourteen years later he returned to the South as a superstar when the Braves moved from Milwaukee to Atlanta. He soon had a contract for \$100,000. For the first time, he had enough money to think about investing.

His initial efforts were clumsy, to say the least. "I was easy, just like so many athletes today," Aaron says. "It's tough when you don't know anything about nothin' and you have all this money."

One of his first ventures was a barbecue joint in southwest Atlanta. Hammerin' Hank's was supposed to be the flagship for a chain of restaurants, but the white businessmen in charge of the enterprise had a fundamentally flawed concept.

"They wanted to sell chopped barbecue," Aaron says. "I told them there wasn't any such thing in this neighborhood; you had to put meat on the bone --- ribs. They didn't listen to me, and they went out of business."

Another time, a man he met in Florida talked him into speculating on sugar futures. "I put up \$5,000 and doubled my money, but he was just setting me up for the kill," Aaron says. "Next time he wanted more." Total loss: \$20,000.

The most expensive misadventure was a real estate enterprise in the early '70s. Aaron had become baseball's first \$200,000 player and was getting peppered with business propositions. He turned his affairs over to a couple of financial managers he'd rather not call by name. He gave them power of attorney and had his paychecks sent directly to them. They invested his money in real estate, most of it in an office complex near Perimeter Mall, just as Atlanta was sinking into its worst recession in decades.

Aaron's secretary had doubts about the deal and persuaded him to call in an auditor. When the auditor went to see the duo, their office had been vacated.

"I was wiped out," Aaron says. "It was a bad time to invest in real estate, and here I was doing it and losing my butt."

He put his losses at close to \$1 million --- his life's savings. Aaron considered legal action and went to see a lawyer, but they could find no grounds for action. The lawyer raised the possibility of filing for bankruptcy, but Aaron said no.

"I was angry, but I wasn't helpless," he says. "I still had my name and had time to recoup. I just decided to be more careful with my money."

Aaron had just broken the home run record, and his earning power was at its peak. A five-year, \$1 million endorsement contract from Magnavox helped salve his wounds.

After Aaron retired as a player in 1976, Braves owner Ted Turner hired him as director of the team's minor league system. Aaron didn't risk another major business undertaking until he became an Arby's franchisee in Milwaukee in the mid-'80s. He has since sold those restaurants.

The man who got him involved with Arby's was the one who recruited him for Church's and Popeyes in the mid-'90s. Belatti, an Arby's executive before turning chairman of Atlanta-based AFC Enterprises, was surprised by how eagerly Aaron took to the chicken business.

"We didn't expect him to get so involved," Belatti says. "Hank went to the restaurants every day to learn. He worked behind the counter, he checked the grease traps, he timed the employees and talked to the customers."

Victor Haydel, Aaron's son-in-law and president of his restaurant company, says the boss remains attentive to details. "He'll notice that a pole lamp is out and call me about it, and then he'll call back in three hours to make sure we replaced it," he says. "He hates dirty bathrooms."

Aaron keeps his eye on the big picture, too.

"He knows the sales at his restaurants like he used to know batting averages," says Allan Tanenbaum, his former attorney and a close friend.

The company has more than 400 employees and expects sales of at least \$17 million this year. The numbers should grow larger as Aaron and Haydel look to expand with more locations. They'll soon be opening another Krispy Kreme, in Columbus.

The difference between his latest enterprises and his earlier investments is simple, Aaron says: Like the great hitter he was, he finally learned to be patient in business.

"Before, I just wanted to make a quick dollar. This time I went in with a game plan: I was going to nurse these businesses along and spend whatever I had to for at least 10 years to let them grow. And that's what I'm doing. I haven't taken out a nickel."

Aaron's home base these days is his BMW dealership on Jonesboro Road in Union City. His restaurant company operates from a couple of double-wide mobile homes in the back --- they call it the "chicken shack." Aaron works inside, next to the auto showroom in a spacious office decorated with baseball souvenirs and awards recognizing his wide-ranging charity work.

Aaron opened the dealership four years ago after hearing that BMW wanted minority owners. "He didn't know anything about the automobile business when we met," says Philip Capossela, regional vice president for BMW North America. "But he's a quick study. I was impressed with his business experience. Everything he touches seems to turn to gold."

The dealership was profitable within three months, exceeding BMW's expectations. Aaron also made a point of hiring a black general manager.

Since then, Aaron and his automobile partners --- criminal defense lawyer Ed Garland and Madison developer Everett Royal --- have established three other dealerships, with two more in the works.

If he's around when a car sells, Aaron often strolls out of his office to give the buyer an autographed book or baseball. Some customers are startled to see the home run king. "Are you really here?" they'll ask. "I thought they were just using your name."

He's here all right, minding the store almost every day.

"See that monitor?" Aaron says, pointing to a TV screen beside his desk. It's hooked up to surveillance cameras. "I keep my eye on everything around here."

No one is going to steal Hank Aaron's chicken again if he can help it.