

SPORTS SLANTS

- By Ray Shank

Records, they say, are made to be broken! Well, guess what folks ... a record that, a few years ago, people thought could never be eclipsed is about to be broken ... if not this year, at least in 1974.

The seemingly unattainable mark of 715 home runs will belong to Atlanta Braves' Henry (Hank) Aaron. Aaron, as of the middle of last week, was 30 short of tying Babe Ruth's remarkable career total of 714.

When Aaron does break the record, though, there will be arguments ... arguments to the same effect that occurred when Bobby Hull, Bernie Geoffrion, Phil Esposito and, would you believe, Rick MacLeish, either broke or tied Rocket Richard's NHL record of 50 goals in a season.

(Isn't it funny how I seem to get back to hockey, no matter what?)

When Geoffrion first tied Richard's record during the 1960-61 season, Montreal people hated him for it. Geoffrion, they said, took 70 games to score his 50 goals. The Rocket had done it in 50 games.

So, Rocket Richard fans never really accepted the fact that the Rocket's record had been tied or broken, whether it was by Geoffrion, Hull, Esposito, or even Johnny Bucyk.

The same thing is developing in the case of Aaron. Babe Ruth became a sort of folk hero in the 1920s and 1930s, when, according to those who followed the game then, the game was at its best.

Those people say that today baseball, like hockey, is diluted.

The fact is, however (and one has to face facts), that Aaron is about to break a long-standing record, no matter what anyone says.

Ruth set the 714 mark in 8,399 times at bat. Aaron has already gone to the plate more than 11,000 times during his 20-year career.

But, it must be remembered that Aaron has played in an era of night games and coast-to-coast travel which, in their own ways, have been factors far more strenuous than any of the players in Ruth's era encountered.

Aaron has received much harassment since it became obvious that he would break Ruth's record. Most of the harassment has been racial. He receives about 600 letters a day and admits that a big percentage are of hate nature, saying he is infringing on white American folklore.

The strain of getting close to baseball's

most fabled record is taking its toll on Hank.

"I'm going to set the record and get out of baseball," Aaron says. "It's something playing this game, but if you've got to play and be driven halfway to the crazy house doing it, it's not worth it. Here I am, a black man trying to infringe on a white man's territory. You know, it feels kind of bad. I never said I was as good as Babe Ruth. What am I supposed to do, stop hitting?"

Aaron has been attracting more exposure than Roger Maris, the former New York Yankee, who hit 61 homers in 1961. Maris has an asterisk beside his name in the record books because it was done in a 162-game schedule. Ruth hit 60 in a 154-game sked in 1927.

NBC-TV, for instance, is considering buying rights to televise Aaron's every time at bat after he reached 713 and until he breaks the record (715). The network would break into regular programming for each appearance, even in prime time.

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