

By Whitney M. Young Jr.

Can a Negro Play Ball in Atlanta?



Slugging Negro outfielder Hank Aaron of the Milwaukee Braves, one of the perennial terrors of National League pitchers, has voiced reservations about playing in Atlanta if that's where his ballclub turns up next season.

Aaron, who stroked 24 home runs this year, knocked in 95 runs and belted a respectable .328, is a valued asset to his employers, who apparently have wearied of Milwaukee even if their star outfielder has not.

Now he is torn between his loyalty to the Braves and his obligations to his family.

He is wondering aloud about housing conditions and other opportunities there. Would his children attend a segregated and inferior school? Would they be rebuffed, snubbed or scarred psychologically if the Braves play in Georgia?

"I just won't step out on the field" if the club moves there, he told a wire service reporter. "I certainly don't like the idea of playing in Atlanta and I have no intention of taking my family there."

His absence from the Braves lineup might ease the cares of rival National League managers but it would be a severe blow to the Braves.

It would also dash the hopes of Atlanta's Negro leaders who have worked tirelessly to bring professional baseball and football clubs to Georgia's first city.

They've labored in the conviction that integrated pro teams would dramatically demonstrate what citizens of color can accomplish given equal opportunities.

It is their hope that Aaron's big bat and superstar popularity will help knock Jim Crow out of town.

Atlanta's NAACP President C. Miles Smith has written Aaron asking him to change his mind and play.

Atlanta, he said, is a progressive, bustling city where conditions are improving steadily for Negroes.

Like other Negro leaders, Smith knows fully that Atlanta has its shortcomings. Early this year, 54 signed a declaration calling for improvements that would make direct action protests unnecessary. They heeded Rev. Martin Luther King's warning that time was "running out" for Atlanta if it did not make more rapid strides in race relations.

Since then, virtually all public places were "voluntarily" opened to Negroes—either by the presence of pickets, pressure from the Attorney General's office, passage of the Civil Rights Act or quiet, but effective negotiation by the Urban League.

Mayor Ivan Allen, who pleaded eloquently for the Act in Congress, is regarded as one of the South's outstanding progressives who has helped create a climate in which change can be made peacefully.

But Atlanta has a long way to go in bettering its schools, housing and job opportunities for Negroes.

For example, one-half of the city's rental units occupied by Negroes are substandard and 80 percent of the adult population over 25 years of age holds no high school diploma.

For Aaron, the choice is difficult.

To him, doffing his hat when the "Star Spangled Banner" is piped over the loudspeaker opening day in the city's new \$18,000,000 stadium may prove bitter irony if he fears for the welfare of his family.

But such a sacrifice is earnestly desired by Negro leaders who are hopeful that his big bat will help them hammer out an "Open City," one in which opportunities are translated into reality for all.