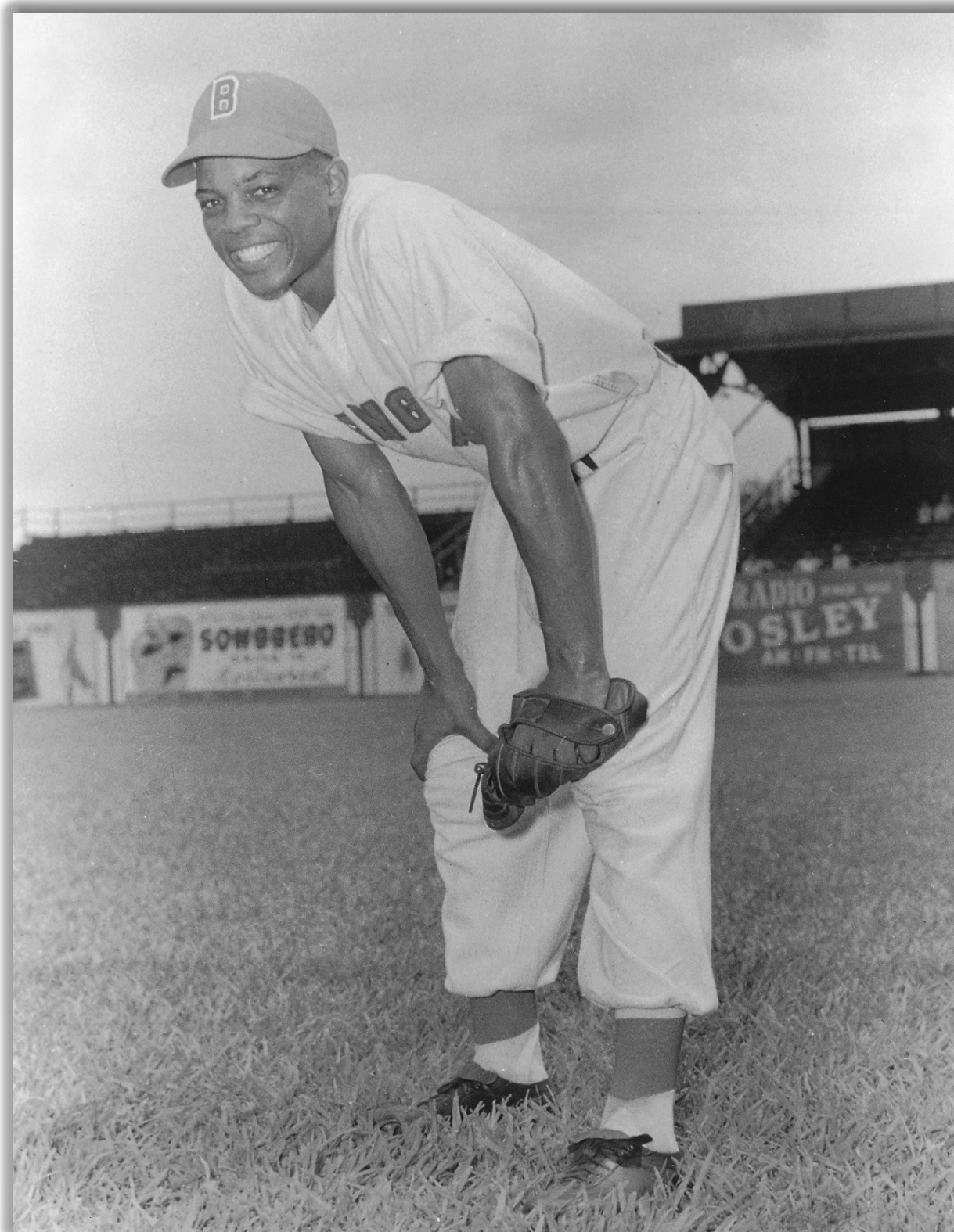


The Newsletter of America's Oldest Ballpark

Volume 5, Issue 2

August 18, 2024

# RICKWOOD TALES



**WILLIE MAYS (MAY 6, 1931–JUNE 18, 2024)**

# RICKWOOD TALES

## Rickwood Calendar 8/18/24 to 10/27/24

- **Aug. 18:** Rickwood turns 114 years old!
- **Sept. 7-8:** Perfect Game Tournament
- **Sept. 14:** Alternative Baseball Organization
- **Sept. 15, 21-22, 28-29:** Perfect Game Tournaments
- **Oct. 5:** Jazz Concert
- **Oct. 22-26:** Baseball Fantasy Camp
- **Oct. 27 (Morning):** MLB Players Alumni Association—Legends for Youth Clinic
- **Oct. 27 (Afternoon):** Rickwood's Third Annual Home Run Derby

Please like our Facebook Page for updates about events at the park:  
[www.facebook.com/friendsofrickwood.com](http://www.facebook.com/friendsofrickwood.com)

### Get Your Rickwood Gear!

Caps, t-shirts, jackets, posters, books, coffee mugs, and other Rickwood merchandise are available for purchase at <https://rickwood.com/shop/>



## THE CARDINALS AND GIANTS PLAYED A HISTORIC GAME AT RICKWOOD FIELD

Thursday, June 20, 2024, was not the first time a major league team played at Rickwood Field. Big league clubs appeared at the ballpark from 1911 until 1986. These contests have included intrasquad matchups, games against the Barons or the Southern League All-Stars, and sometimes against other major league teams. Thanks to the tireless research of Joe DeLeonard, we know that there were roughly 230 major league exhibition contests. These games included Hall of Famers such as Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, and many more.

Rickwood has also seen some memorable matchups: such as in 1927 when 13 future Hall of Famers took the field as the New York Giants played the Washington Senators; in 1954, when the Checkers Law was briefly repealed, which allowed the Brooklyn Dodgers to meet the Milwaukee Braves in an Birmingham's first integrated game; four days later when the Giants and Cleveland Indians — teams that would meet again

that October in the World Series — played at Rickwood; in 1971, when those hated rivals the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox faced off — Munson versus Yaz; or in July of 1982 when, in the middle of a pennant race and a long road trip, the Atlanta Braves flew to Birmingham through a thunderstorm on a day off to play the Southern League All-Stars.

With MLB's 2020 announcement that seven professional Negro leagues, which operated from 1920-48, have been designated as having "major league" status, we now know that many big league teams played regular and postseason games at America's Oldest Ballpark. This includes five home games for the Birmingham Black Barons in the Negro League World Series from 1943 to 1948. Additionally, Rickwood has now been a major league ballpark since 1924. SABR researchers John Shorey and Kevin Warneke have determined that Rickwood's (and Alabama's) first major-league

game was on April 28, 1924, when the Black Barons defeated the Cuban Stars, 6-3.

Of course, the game between the St. Louis Cardinals and the San Francisco Giants was different. For one thing, it was the first time the fans watching a professional game at Rickwood knew they were watching a regular season *major league* game. For another, this game included a tribute to the Negro Leagues, appearances by Hall of Famers Ken Griffey, Jr., Derek Jeter, Reggie Jackson, and David Ortiz, and a national TV audience, which was Fox's highest-rated Thursday baseball broadcast since 2022.

Beginning with MLB's announcement last year that Rickwood would host a regular season game, the anticipation among Birmingham residents and baseball fans around the country has been building. We have nervously watched our

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## BARONS AND BISCUITS RETURN PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL TO RICKWOOD AFTER A 5-YEAR WAIT

From 1996 to 2019, the Birmingham Barons returned to Rickwood Field most years for the annual Rickwood Classic as the club paid homage to baseball history at the ballpark. During the 23 Rickwood Classics, the Barons wore throwback uniforms remembering past Barons squads, the Black Barons, the A's, and industrial league teams. In 2020, the pandemic canceled the Classic and the entire Southern League season. Although the

Barons returned in 2021, Major League Baseball adopted uniform guidelines, primarily focusing on player and fan safety at all professional ballparks. This impacted our ability to host the Rickwood Classic without necessary and reasonable improvements to the ballpark, such as netting, padded outfield walls, upgrading the playing field, and other items. Work on those upgrades began on October 25, 2023, and was completed by

June 18, 2024, in time for the Barons to host the Montgomery Biscuits in the first minor league game at Rickwood in five years.

With MLB paying tribute to Willie Mays and the Negro Leagues during the week, the Barons had an easy choice for their throwback uniforms. The team honored the 1948 Black Barons, which finished 62-28-2 (.689) in

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*"Willie Mays was made for baseball. Baseball was made for Willie Mays." — Reggie Jackson*



## NEWS OF WILLIE MAYS'S DEATH MADE THE BARONS' RETURN TO RICKWOOD BITTERSWEET

Everyone was thrilled last year when Major League Baseball announced that the St. Louis Cardinals would host the San Francisco Giants on June 20, 2024, in the first regular season game at Rickwood Field as part of MLB's tribute to the Negro Leagues. While I was also excited to see a big league game at our ballpark, I told anyone who would listen that the underrated part of the week would come two days earlier on June 18, when the Birmingham Barons would return to Rickwood to play the Montgomery Biscuits. After all, five long years had passed since the Barons played in the 23rd Rickwood Classic. Tickets for the minor league game were also significantly less expensive and much easier to obtain.

Adding to the nostalgia, the Barons took the opportunity to honor Willie Mays by wearing the uniforms of the 1948 Birmingham Black Barons, which played Homestead in the final Negro League World Series. As a seventeen-year-old, Mays played center field for the Black Barons in his first professional season. He and Bill Greason were the last surviving members of the club. Montgomery remembered its history in the Negro Leagues by wearing throwbacks of the Gray Sox. The game was also the first professional matchup

at Rickwood before a national television audience, as the contest was broadcast on the MLB Network.

I told my wife Stephanie that I wanted to walk to the end of the grandstand on the right field side of the park immediately after the seventh-inning stretch. My plan was for us to slowly walk back from there around the rim of the grandstand until we got to left field so that I could take photographs for the newsletter during our stroll. When we got to right field, I had just started taking pictures when the usher turned to me and said, "I just got an alert on my phone. Willie Mays died." I couldn't believe it, but it didn't take long to confirm on our phones that he was gone.

Unbeknownst to us, and most of the people in attendance, Mays's death had already been announced on the television broadcast. As we walked back through the grandstand, we saw the story filtering across the ballpark. Fans who were smiling and cheering, suddenly had their joy interrupted, as someone would hold up a phone and share the sad news. By the time we got to left field, we saw more than

one person crying. A young man wearing a Ken Griffey, Jr., jersey exclaimed to his companion, "You just don't realize what a big deal this is!" He was right.

When the official announcement of Mays's passing came an inning later, the fans gave him a standing ovation. The applause soon turned to chants of "WIL-LIE! WIL-LIE!"

In 2017, I was fortunate to contribute biographies on Piper Davis and Jimmie Newberry -- Willie Mays's manager and teammate -- for SABR in *Bittersweet Goodbye: The Black Barons, The Grays, and the 1948 Negro League World Series*. What made that series bittersweet was that no one realized it was the last one and it marked the beginning of the end of the Negro Leagues. The Negro National League collapsed after the series while the Negro American League withered and finally folded 14 years later. Like that book, news of Mays's death on the very day that baseball honored him, his Black Barons team, and his first professional ballpark, was bittersweet indeed. It was a poignant moment in the history of our ballpark that will never be forgotten.

- Jeb Stewart

*"news of Mays's death on the very day that baseball honored him, his Black Barons team, and his first professional ballpark, was bittersweet indeed."*



*"Maybe I was born to play baseball. Maybe I truly was." – Willie Mays*

## FIRST MLB GAME AT RICKWOOD WAS SPECIAL

- Continued from page 2

ballpark receive some much-needed repairs and the necessary improvements to make the field MLB-ready. The City of Birmingham from the Mayor's office, the City Council, the Friends of Rickwood, and all our citizens have stepped up to make the MLB game a reality. And the entire event was a wonderful spectacle that surpassed the hype.

Five-time Grammy award winner Jon Batiste kicked off the celebration with scintillating performances of "Master Power" and "I Need You" as he shook hands with many of the 55 Negro Leaguers who the Giants and Cardinals players escorted onto the field.

After a video tribute to Willie Mays, who played in the Negro Leagues for the Birmingham Black Barons, and who died that Tuesday, Barry Bonds and Ken Griffey, Jr., joined Willie Mays's son Michael at home plate. Michael said to the crowd, "Birmingham, I've been telling y'all if there's any way on earth my father could come down here, that he would. Well, he's found another way. So, you've already stood to your feet. Let him hear you, he's listening." In a moving moment, the fans in attendance erupted in cheers and chants of "Wil-lie! Wil-lie!"

Batiste and his band then played "Lift Every Voice" and the national anthem as four fighter jets from the 187th Fighter Wing of the Alabama National Guard flew overhead. Bill Greason, 99 years old, and a former teammate of Willie Mays in 1948, then threw out the first pitch to the cheer of the 8,332 in attendance.

The game was pretty damn good too and included an all-Black umpire crew for the first time in MLB history. The Cardinals paid homage to the St. Louis Stars by

wearing throwback uniforms of the Negro National League franchise. The Giants honored the San Francisco Sea Lions of the West Coast Negro Baseball League by wearing their uniforms. Both teams wore patches remembering Willie Mays and the Giants hung his jersey in their dugout. His number was also painted into the grass behind home plate.

At 6:15 PM, Giants' second basemen Brett Wisely stepped into the batter's box against Cardinals starter Andre Pallante who started the game by throwing a ball before luring a grounder for the first out. Pallante then fanned centerfielder Heliot Ramos for the game's first strikeout. With two outs in the top of the first, catcher Patrick Bailey flared a single to right for the first hit of the game, but Pallante escaped further trouble.

In the bottom of the first, Cardinals' second baseman Nolan Gorman came to the plate with one out and runners at the corners. His high fly to left center scored shortstop Masyn Winn for the first run. With two outs and runners at the corners, left fielder Brendan Donovan crushed a home run to right that nearly reached Rickwood's original concrete wall 450 feet away. For Donovan, who is from Enterprise, Alabama, and attended the University of South Alabama, it was his ninth homer of the season. He led the Cardinals with three hits in the game.

In the top of the third, the Giants' bats awoke. Mike Yastrzemski, Yaz's grandson, opened the frame by slashing a groundball single to center. After Wisely hit a one-out single, Ramos homered to right to tie the game at three apiece. The Cardinals bounced back in the bottom of the inning rallying for two

runs. Winn doubled and Alex Burleson singled to move him to third. Gorman's second sacrifice fly scored Winn. After Donovan doubled to move Burleson to third, Giants' reliever Randy Rodriguez uncorked a wild pitch scoring Burleson to give the Cardinals a 5-3 lead.

In the bottom of the fifth, the Cardinals added another run when Donovan's two-out single scored Burleson. The top half of the inning was nearly as notable. In honor of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Willie Mays's catch in the first game of the '54 World Series, Fox turned back the clock on its coverage. Using black and white with 1950s-style graphics, the network also employed fixed cameras with no replays.

Now trailing 6-3, the Giants got two baserunners in the top of the sixth. With one out, Cardinals' manager Oliver Marmol called on Andrew Kittredge to relieve Pallante. Wilmer Flores greeted him with a single to center to score Matt Chapman. Nick Ahmed then hit a sac fly to left field to score Jorge Soler narrowing the Cardinals lead to 6-5. However, the Giants managed only two more hits for the rest of the game.

In the bottom of the ninth, Marmol handed the ball to his closer, Ryan Helsley. After he walked Trenton Brooks, Wisely hit a fly to right and Ramos struck out. With two outs, Bailey got his fourth hit, a single to right to move Tyler Fitzgerald, who was pinch running for Brooks, to second. Helsley then struck out Chapman on three pitches to end the game, as the Cardinals held on, winning 6-5. Pallante got the win while Giants' starter Keaton Winn took the loss.

Following the game, fireworks exploded from center field as Kool & The Gang's "Celebration" played over the loudspeakers. Brendan Donovan, the Cardinals' hero, was in awe of the signifi-

*"With two outs and runners at the corners, left fielder Brendan Donovan crushed a home run to right that nearly reached Rickwood's original concrete wall 450 feet away."*

*"The first thing I ever put my mind to was to play at Rickwood Field." – Willie Mays*

## “DUSTING ‘EM OFF”: FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I pen this column, it is a hot, humid day at Rickwood Field. The Dog Days of summer are certainly upon us. It has been a memorable and historic year at Rickwood thus far, and it is still not done.

Our ballpark has gotten a lot of attention this year from NPR's [Road to Rickwood](#) podcast series, to numerous newspaper articles around the country, as well as the nationally televised broadcasts of both the MiLB and MLB games in June. Champ Creative also created an incredible hype video for the MLB game that can be viewed on [Vimeo](#) and [YouTube](#). Topps even produced cards for the game!

The game between the Cardinals and Giants exceeded our wildest expectations. All the events, including the minor league game, the celebrity softball contest, and the MLB game were just tremendous. The joy I saw on everyone's faces, from the sanitation workers to the Commissioner of Baseball, was unmistakable. I was truly honored that the Commissioner wanted to meet me. We owe many thanks to our partners and our board members who helped make this dream come true.

By the time you read this column, the disassembling of the scaffolding for the Jumbotron will be complete. The temporary ramps to the seating area, the camera platforms on the grandstand roof, and the extended netting from the dugouts to the foul poles will all have been removed. The changing of the outfield signs back to local ones will eventually occur, but there is no timetable as of yet. There will be more subtle changes coming to the ballpark over the next weeks and months. Rickwood will slowly look more familiar to all of us.

The ballpark was blessed to have plenty of rain in July, but this limited the use of the field. August will be a light month in terms of events, but September will see an increase in activity.

The Alternative Baseball Organization brings a special mission and game to Rickwood Field on September 14. The group provides those 15 and over with autism and other special needs a chance to play competitive baseball. Life skills and other personal development traits are enhanced and encouraged by this relatively new and growing organization. Founder, Taylor Duncan, has invited several for-

mer big leaguers and local celebrities to participate in the event. Please stay tuned for details.

**Rickwood's third annual Home Run Derby** will take place on **Sunday, October 27<sup>th</sup>**. The marquee player participating in the derby is Brian Jordan, a former member of the Atlanta Braves. More players will soon be announced on social media and in our next newsletter. We hope to see you there.

Finally, we were all saddened to learn of Willie Mays's death during the MiLB game between the Barons and the Biscuits. The Barons were honoring Willie and his first team, the 1948 Black Barons, and his Hall of Fame plaque was at the park.

This newsletter is our tribute to Willie's memory. We have installed a bas-relief plaque of Willie wearing his Black Barons cap as a permanent display in our museum. We hope you will come to visit us and see it.

- Gerald Watkins

*“We have installed a bas-relief plaque of Willie wearing his Black Barons cap as a permanent display in our museum. We hope you will come to visit us and see it.”*

## ALABAMA'S BRENDAN DONOVAN WAS HERO OF MLB GAME

cance of the history that had just happened stating, “What a special night. I mean this is something that we should celebrate. This right here is pretty amazing and to do it in Alabama – and I've got some friends and family in the stands – I think it's pretty close, it's like, I've been playing summer ball again, right?”

Donovan was impressed with Rickwood adding, “I had heard about this field. I know a lot of my buddies have played here, but I'd never been here myself, so I wasn't sure. But they always told me it's a big yard, so I'm glad they

brought the fence in just a tick.”

Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred declared the event a success and added, “We're going to be back in Birmingham at some point. The timing is still up in the air. We haven't really made a decision on that.” Mayor Woodfin told John Shea of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “We believe this isn't a one-off and are hoping this isn't a one-off ... MLB will always have a home here. As for an annual event, we'd love to see it happen. We'd love to work it out.”

MLB at Rickwood Field was an incredible night for the ballpark, which turns 114 years old today.

Rickwood was finally shown off to a national audience and it has never looked better. But, as Ray Kinsella said in *Field of Dreams*, it was more than that. It was perfect. We have a lot to be proud of as a city and we are all Friends of Rickwood, We don't know when MLB will return, but we'll be ready.

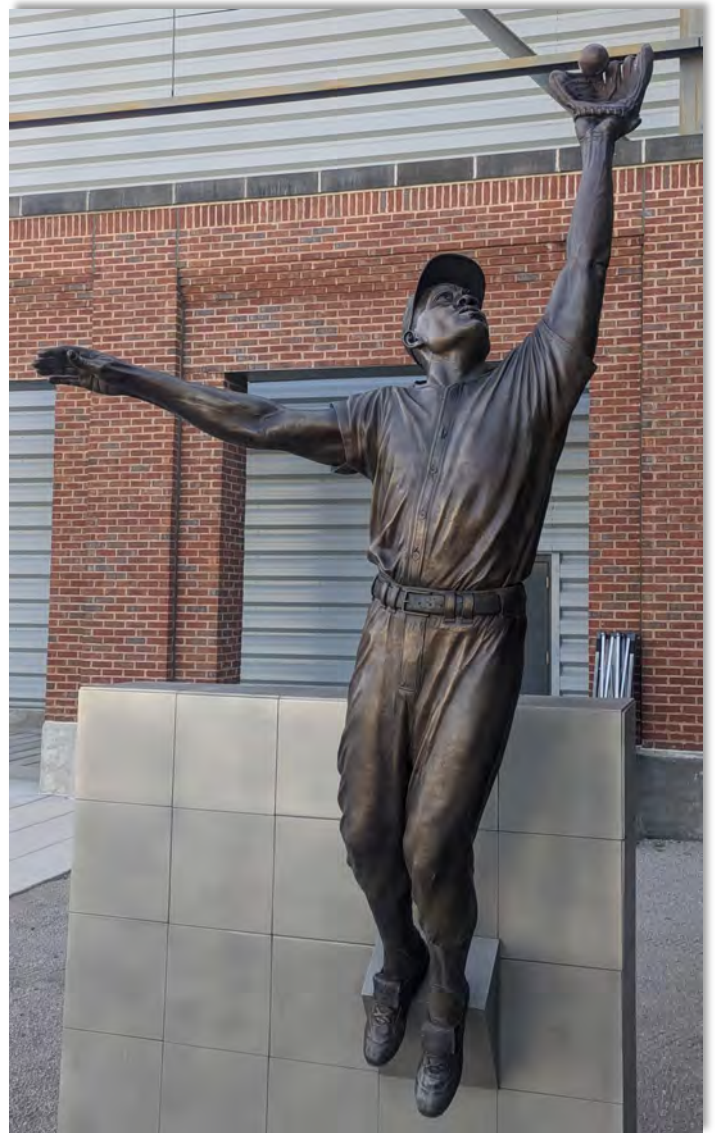
- Jeb Stewart

*“We have a lot to be proud of as a city and we are all Friends of Rickwood, We don't know when MLB will return, but we'll be ready.”*

*“I'm not sure what the hell charisma is, but I get the feeling it's Willie Mays.” – Ted Kluszewski*



## BIRMINGHAM REMEMBERS WILLIE MAYS



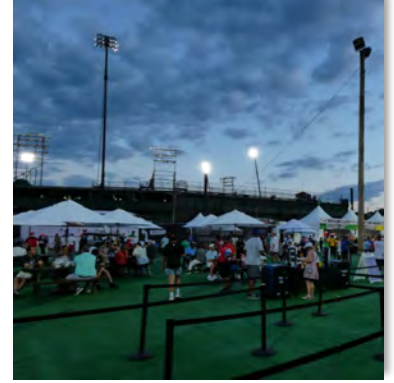
*"I honestly did everything in baseball that a baseball player can do, and I did it with love." – Willie Mays*







# PHOTOS FROM THE MILB AND MLB GAMES AT RICKWOOD



**TONIGHTS LINE - UPS**  
MILB AT RICKWOOD FIELD

MONTGOMERY (36-27)			BIRMINGHAM (39-24)		
3	CHANDLER SIMPSON	CF 1	TERRELL TATUM		RF
7	CARSON WILLIAMS	SS 10	JACOB GONZALEZ		SS
44	BOB SEYMOUR	1B 2	BROOKS BALDWIN		2B
12	DOMINIC KEEGAN	C 27	EDGAR QUERO		C
5	NICK SCHNELL	RF 25	TIM ELKO		1B
10	KENNY PIPER	DH 7	WILFRED VERAS		LF
2	TANNER MURRAY	3B 8	JACOB BURKE		CF
4	DRU EAKER	LF 14	ALSANDER WOMACK		DH
23	JALEN BATTLES	2B 24	JASON MATTHEWS		3B
24	BOLE WILCOX	P 36	JAIRO IRIARTE		P



*"That was the finest catch I have ever seen and the finest catch I ever hope to see." – Branch Rickey (in a note to Mays)*





Photo credit Jeff Burkle

*"I knew Mays would make the catch." – Arnold Hano  
(from A Day in The Bleachers)*



PHOTOS FROM THE MILB AND MLB GAMES AT RICKWOOD



*“There have been only two geniuses in the world: Willie Mays and Willie Shakespeare.” – Tallulah Bankhead*





*"They invented the All-Star game For Willie Mays." – Ted Williams*



## RICKWOOD'S CHAMPIONSHIPS: THE 1948 BIRMINGHAM BARONS

If you wander over by the third-base side of the exterior grandstand, you'll see that the Friends of Rickwood have commemorated the championship clubs that have called America's Oldest Ballpark home from 1910-1987. This series remembers those teams.

In 1938, the owner of the Birmingham Barons decided the time had come to shorten the home run fence at Rickwood Field, and the club increased its homer total by more than 20 percent. Ten years later, third-year general manager Eddie Glennon ordered the fences moved in even further to increase round-trippers and attendance at the ballpark for the 1948 campaign. The club rewarded his efforts by hitting 93 home runs, which reflected an increase of 17 percent from the previous season. With only 51 team steals, the Barons' offensive philosophy had changed with the times.

Other important changes took place before the season, which paved the way for October's victory parade. The Barons ended their one-year affiliation with the Philadelphia Athletics and began a five-year partnership with the Boston Red Sox. The new relationship paid immediate dividends, as Boston stocked Birmingham's roster with power-hitting prospects. And, "[b]est of all," recalled Allen Barra in *Rickwood Field: A Century in America's Oldest Ballpark*, "a brand-new score-

board topped off with a giant clock, forty feet from the ground, became Rickwood's new landmark." Naylor Stone of the *Birmingham Post* boldly predicted a first-division finish for the Barons and a spot in the playoffs.

Before tending to the business of competing against their Southern Association rivals, the Barons played a series of exhibition games against the Red Sox, Athletics, Tigers, Cardinals, and Yankees at Rickwood. The Barons honored Yankee broadcaster, and Birmingham-native, Mel Allen before the last game. The A's appearance at Rickwood brought with them the deepest connection to Rickwood's rich tapestry. After all, their 88-year-old manager, Connie Mack, had been to Rickwood nearly forty years earlier, as he assisted former Barons owner Rick Woodward in designing the first steel and concrete ballpark in the minor leagues.

As the Summer of '48 unfolded, Manager Fred Walters treated Birmingham partisans to competitive baseball that kept the Barons in the first division and primed for the playoffs. The Barons batted .294 as a team. The heart of the lineup featured three sluggers having terrific seasons. Right fielder George Wil-

son socked 27 home runs and batted .335 while producing a team-high .608 slugging percentage. Center fielder Tommy O'Brien added 19 home runs while batting .359 with a .575 slugging percentage. Future major leaguer Walt Dropo played first base and batted .359 with a .557 slugging percentage.

Dropo also connected on 14 home runs, one which is still fondly remembered today as possibly the longest home run ever hit at Rickwood Field. On May 21, in front of 14,565 fans, Dropo hit a ball that sailed high over Rickwood's scoreboard and narrowly missed clearing the original concrete wall by only three feet.

The homer made Dropo a local celebrity and hero in Birmingham. UPI's Roland Dopson wrote that following the home run, the public address announcer reported that Dropo had been rewarded with steak and chicken dinners from so many local restaurants that it took five minutes to announce them all. By June 2, a photo of Dropo and teammate Eddie Lyons appeared in newspapers showing the pair standing under an "X" with the following description: "467 FT., WHERE WALT DROPO HIT HOME RUN MAY 21, 1948."

*"On May 21, Dropo hit a ball which sailed high over Rickwood's scoreboard and narrowly missed clearing the original concrete wall by only three feet."*



*"I think anybody who saw him will tell you that Willie Mays was the greatest player who ever lived." – Monte Irvin*



These days the 467-foot blast is commemorated with a plaque. Dropo's "X" remains one of the must-see stops on any tour of Rickwood Field.

The Barons pitching staff featured Mike Palm (14-8, 2.20, 180 IP), Al LaMacchia (11-8, 4.83, 162 IP) and John Hoffman (10-7, 5.23). Fritz Dorish, Alex Ronay, and Pete Modica contributed nine, eight, and seven wins, respectively. 18 players on the roster spent time in the big leagues.

The Barons lagged behind the Nashville Vols and Memphis Chicks for most of the season. However, GM Eddie Glennon's plan to build a winner was working as the *Birmingham Post* reported, on August 2, that the attendance record, set only one year earlier, had already been surpassed. By season's end, the Barons boasted the highest-ever season attendance total at Rickwood Field, as 445,926 fans saw regular season games.

On August 17, as baseball mourned the death of Babe Ruth, the Barons stood on the edge of the playoffs with a mediocre rec-

ord of 66-60. From there, the Barons got on a hot streak. By September 1, they had won 10 games in a row, and the *Birmingham Post* reported they ended the season by winning 14 out of their final 16 games to finish with an 84-69 record. The Barons finished 11 games behind the first-place Nashville Vols and the second-place Memphis Chicks. However, as the third-place regular season finisher, Birmingham qualified for the playoffs.

Under the Southern Association's Shaughnessy playoff format, the first-place Vols played the fourth-place Mobile Bears, while the second-place Chicks met the Barons. Against the Chicks, the Barons had played particularly poorly during the regular season at Memphis's Russwood Park, with a forgettable 3-9 record.

Birmingham manager Fred Walters predicted "We'll give them all a fight! ... The team that grows hot in the playoffs will win. We're hot right now. We have as good a chance as any of the other three clubs."

Walters was right. The Barons won both games in Memphis, by scores of 3-2 and 9-3. Naylor Stone reported the Barons had continued their late-season success and were playing "hotter than firecrackers, hot tamales, or cayenne pepper." The Barons finished off the Chicks taking the first-round series, four games to two, as they destroyed Memphis, 13-3, in the finale.

Against the Nashville Vols, Birmingham lost its first game at Nashville's Sulphur Dell. The setback was short-lived, however, as the Barons won four of the next five games to take the championship of the Southern Association.

On October 4, the *Birmingham Post* announced an Appreciation Fund for the Barons as the Dixie Series was getting underway. The contributions totaled \$23. In the Series, the Barons met the Texas League Champions, the Fort Worth Cats (also known as the Panthers), who were managed by Birmingham native and former Brooklyn Dodger

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*"We'll give them all a fight! ... The team that grows hot in the playoffs will win. We're hot right now. We have as good a chance as any of the other three clubs."*



*"Willie Mays was the best baseball player I ever saw. He could do anything." – Umpire Doug Harvey*

## 1948 WAS BIRMINGHAM'S SEMINAL BASEBALL YEAR

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Bobby Bragan, and whose pitching staff was anchored by future major leaguer Carl Erskine.

On October 1, the *Birmingham News* trumpeted a "royal welcome for the invading Texans for the Dixie Series opener here tomorrow night," as a parade led the team from its arrival by train at Terminal Station to the Thomas Jefferson Hotel. Newspapers favored the Cats to win the series because Ft. Worth had won the Texas League regular season and then dispatched Tulsa in the playoffs.

17,000 fans showed up to Rickwood to watch the first game of the series, which the Cats won easily, 5-1. Ft. Worth pitcher Eddie Chandler scattered five hits. Johnny Legres and player-manager Bragan hit homers to lead the Cats' offense.

Birmingham secured a home split the following day winning 8-4. This time Mike Palm pitched well enough for the Barons to win, while Dropo powered the offense. As reported by the *Anniston Star*,

"A rain-slimmed crowd of 10,000 saw the big bat of Walt Dropo, Birmingham first baseman, provide the offensive punch for the Southern Association playoff winners. Dropo hit a single, a double and a home run with two mates on base." The teams then boarded trains to Ft. Worth as the series shifted to Texas for three games.

In Game Three, 11,553 fans packed LaGrave Field and saw the Barons win an exciting contest, 5-4. The Barons were able to score two unearned runs early, but soon trailed, 3-2, heading into the seventh inning. Once again, Dropo was the hero hitting a 450-foot two-run homer, as the Barons won 5-4 and gained a 2-1 series advantage.

The next day Birmingham took a commanding 3-1 lead in the series. This time the Barons got revenge on Game One Winner Eddie Chandler by scoring three runs in the first and knocking him out of the game. Dropo was again in the thick of the action driving in a run.

Needing just one more win to clinch the Dixie Series championship, the Barons dismissed all suspense by winning Game Five, 3-1, behind strong pitching from Al LaMacchia, along with homers by Tommy O'Brien and George Wilson.

The October 8 headline of the front page of the *Birmingham Post* declared: "Barons To Have Royal Welcome: Big Victory Parade to Mark Homecoming." The parade traveled from Terminal Station to the Tutwiler Hotel, where the Barons celebrated their Dixie Series Championship over breakfast.

Zipp Newman reported in the *Birmingham News* that "the 1948 Barons are the third Baronial club to win the Dixie Series out of five starts for Birmingham clubs."

With the Barons and Black Barons both winning championships, 1948 will always be the seminal summer for baseball in Birmingham and the history of Rickwood Field.

### BARONS RETURN TO RICKWOOD

- Continued from page 2

the Negro American League and defeated the Kansas City Monarchs for the NAL pennant before losing to the Homestead Grays in the final Negro League World Series. Willie Mays was a seventeen-year-old rookie on that team, which was managed by player-manager Piper Davis. Montgomery remembered its history in the Negro Leagues by wearing throwback uniforms of the Gray Sox, which won a Negro Southern League pennant in 1920. The Biscuits were also the Barons most recent Rickwood Classic opponent in 2019.

Montgomery immediately jumped on Barons starter Jairo Iriarte scoring two in the first and adding three more runs in the second. But Iriarte hung tough and managed to pitch

six innings. The Barons chipped away to make the score 5-4 by the end of the seventh inning. Not long after that, the public address announcer reported to fans the sad news of Willie Mays's death. If ever Birmingham was going to rally, surely it would be on the night that baseball honored Mays's first professional team in his home ballpark.

The Biscuits led 6-4 entering the bottom of the ninth. Barons third baseman Jason Matthews opened the inning with a single to center. The fans' hopes grew as right fielder Terrell Tatum poked a single past the shortstop. After Jacob Gonzalez struck out, second baseman Brooks Baldwin hit a bloop single to load the bases. Now the

fans were abuzz with excitement. Catcher Edgar Quero kept the turnstile moving by sharply lining a hit past a diving shortstop and bringing Matthews home. The Barons seemed destined to win one for Willie. But, with one out and the bases loaded, first baseman Tim Elko grounded into a 4-6-3 double play to end the game and the Biscuits won, 6-5.

A. Bartlett Giamatti once wrote about baseball, "It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart." The disappointed fans couldn't help but feel that way on this evening, but it was still great to have the Barons come home to Rickwood Field.

- Jeb Stewart

*"With the Barons and Black Barons both winning championships, 1948 will always be a seminal summer for baseball in Birmingham and the history of Rickwood Field."*

*"If ever Birmingham was going to rally, surely it would be on the night that baseball honored Mays's first professional team in his home ballpark."*

*"Willie's speed is deceptive. The best evidence indicates he is a step faster than electricity." — Roger Kahn*



## DID YOU KNOW?

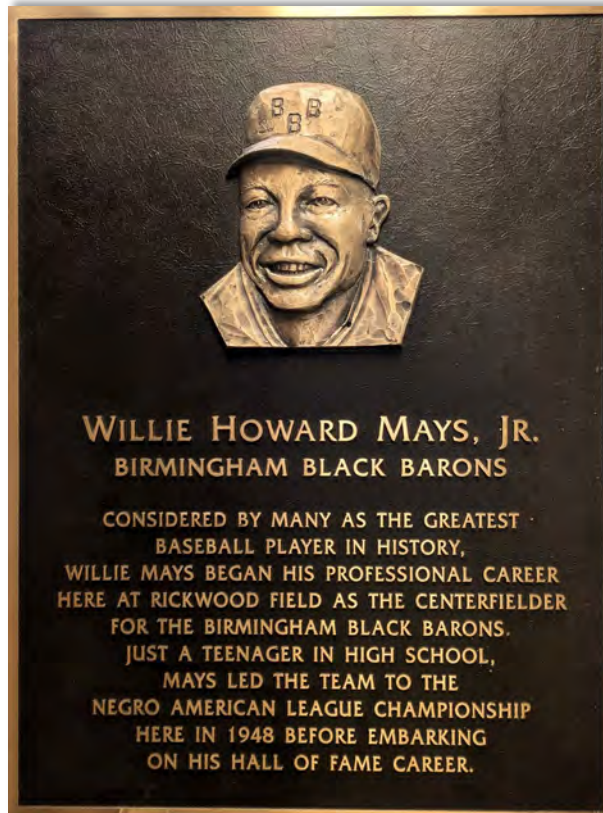
I am a lifelong, childhood-hero-worshipping Willie Mays fan, but not a bobblehead fan. So I was horrified when, some 25 years ago, the Barons announced their Willie Mays's bobblehead night. But when Barons' GM Tony Ensor told me that he was bringing Mr. Mays by Rickwood, all was forgiven.

At that point, the only major renovation that the Friends of Rickwood had completed was the re-building of the distinctive 1940s scoreboard in left centerfield - restoring one of the signature images that is embedded in the collective memory of generations of Rickwood fans and ballplayers alike. So when Mays arrived at Rickwood, we were eager to show him our progress. We hung on his every word as he walked through the first base tunnel, sharing some memories of playing at Rickwood as a teenager.

When we got to home plate (pre-iPhone days or I would have 1,000 photos), he stopped and gazed out towards left field. I was about to gush with great pride about Rickwood's ongoing restoration project when Mays asked "Why'd you move the scoreboard?"

As it turns out, when we rebuilt the old scoreboard, the steel fabricator had to move the base about 40 inches to work around the old concrete foundation. 40 inches! Mays, who had not been to Rickwood Field in 40 years, remembered exactly where the towering scoreboard had been about 400 feet away. As he explained, "If you wanted to hit a home run, you had to go to the left or right of the scoreboard - otherwise you made it to second base." As I later recalled in Allen Barra's *Rickwood Field: A Century in America's Oldest Ballpark*, his reply "wasn't a complaint or even an accusation. It was a fact ... He knew exactly where it was supposed to be. Exactly. He ruled that ballpark briefly in his youth, and to many Rickwood will always bear his imprint." Bobblehead aside, add this to the legend.

- Coke Matthews



*"I was about to gush with great pride about Rickwood's ongoing restoration project when Mays asked 'Why'd you move the scoreboard?'"*

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## BECOME A FRIEND OF RICKWOOD

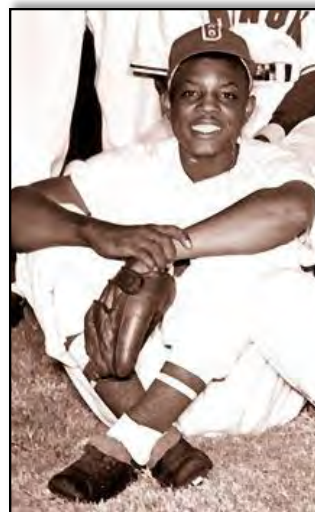
The Friends of Rickwood is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, which was formed in 1992, and is dedicated to preserving America's Oldest Ballpark. Anyone can become a Friend of Rickwood by donating to the Friends.

We have four levels of membership for individuals and each level will receive a certificate, a window sticker, and 10% off Rickwood merchandise: (1) Level 1 is a "Little Leaguer" for a \$10 donation; (2) Level 2 is a "Rookie" for a \$25 donation; (3) Level 3 is a "Veteran" for a \$50

donation (and also gets a patch); and (4) Level 4 is a "Gold Glover" for a \$100 donation (and also gets a Rickwood shirt). To donate, please visit <https://rickwood.com/donate-to-rickwood-field/> or write us at:

**The Friends of Rickwood  
Rickwood Field  
1137 2nd Ave West  
Birmingham, AL 35204**

**Thanks to all our Friends who have helped make the MLB game a reality!**



*"If he could cook, I'd marry him." – Leo Durocher*

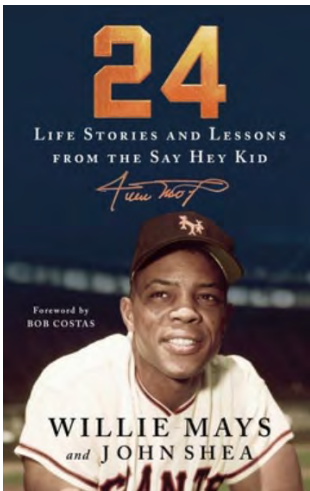
The Friends of  
Rickwood

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<https://www.facebook.com/friendsofrickwood/>



## THE RICKWOOD LIBRARY:

### *24: Life Stories and Lessons from the Say Hey Kid* by Willie Mays and John Shea

Willie Mays is the greatest five-tool player in the history of baseball. In *24: Life Stories and Lessons from the Say Hey Kid*, co-authored by Mays himself and John Shea, readers are treated to a comprehensive and deeply personal account of Mays's remarkable journey through life and baseball. The book's title is borrowed from Mays's uniform number and his life is profiled in 24 chapters. With Major League Baseball finally recognizing his 1948 campaign with the Birmingham Black Barons as being a major league season, the title could just as easily represent Mays's 24 big league seasons. From his humble beginnings in Westfield, Alabama, to roaming Rickwood's spacious outfield as a teenage phenom for the Black Barons, to his illustrious career with the Giants, every phase of Mays's life is explored with vivid storytelling and insightful commentary.

What sets *24* apart from other books about Willie Mays is the unique storytelling approach Mays and Shea took. Based on extensive interviews with Mays himself, along with numerous individuals who have known him over the years, the book breathes life into Mays's story in a way that only a true collaboration can. The narrative is not just about statistics and records; it delves into Mays's personal challenges, triumphs, and the invaluable life lessons that he accumulated throughout his extraordinary career.

*24* richly portrays Mays's early years with the Black Barons. The authors dedicate a chapter to this formative period, vividly describing Rickwood's atmosphere and the challenges Mays faced as a young player striving to make his mark in a segregated baseball world. Mays credited his Birmingham teammates as being instrumental in helping to launch his legendary career:

"It was a different time. We were playing for ourselves but also for people in the community who'd come watch a game and get their minds away from any hardships. I was seventeen and surrounded by strong men and great ballplayers. Alonzo Perry, Artie Wilson, Jim Zapp, Ed Steele, Jimmie Newberry, Sammy C. Williams, Piper Davis. For me, when I look back, these were the guys who taught me things I carried with me throughout my life. I wouldn't have done what I did without those guys."

Throughout the book, Mays's voice resonates with authenticity. His reflections on pivotal moments in his career, such as "The Catch" in the 1954 World Series and his experiences playing alongside legends like Monte Irvin and Willie McCovey, offer readers a glimpse into the mind of an icon. Anecdotes and perspectives of teammates, opponents, coaches, and family members, complete the comprehensive portrait of Mays.

*24* is not merely a recounting of Mays's achievements but a celebration of his enduring impact on the game of baseball and beyond. The book explores themes of sportsmanship, life lessons, and the importance of giving back to the community, illustrating how Mays's influence extends far beyond his statistics and accolades. Shea's narrative skillfully weaves together Mays's own words with historical context and contemporary reflections, creating a compelling narrative that will captivate both longtime fans of Mays and newcomers to his story alike. The prose is engaging and allows Mays's personality and charisma to shine through on every page.

Mays's journey from Birmingham to the big leagues is a testament to the power of perseverance. This book not only honors Mays's remarkable career but also serves as an inspirational testament to the timeless values of courage, integrity, and excellence. For fans of Rickwood, where Mays began his professional journey, *24* offers a special insight into the early days of one of baseball's most iconic figures. It is a fitting tribute to both Mays and the historic ballpark that played a significant role in shaping his career. The ballpark still recalls Mays's early years as the authors observe, "Walk into Rickwood Field now, it's like walking into the past. In fact, if anything needs repair, it's fixed to resemble 1948, Mays's rookie year." *24* is an indispensable addition to the Rickwood library and required reading for anyone who wants to understand the life and legacy of Willie Mays.

- Jeb Stewart



*"Rickwood's been part of my life for all of my life." – Willie Mays*