



An undated posed photo of Willie Mays, center fielder for the San Francisco Giants. (AP)

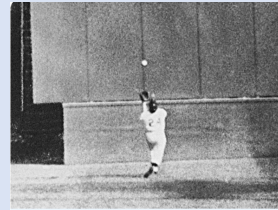
Willie Mays, baseball star of prodigious power and grace, dies at 93

The "Say Hey Kid," who could do it all, was arguably the greatest player in major league history.



By Paul Duggan

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The greatest catch in baseball history.
Rest In Peace Willie Mays

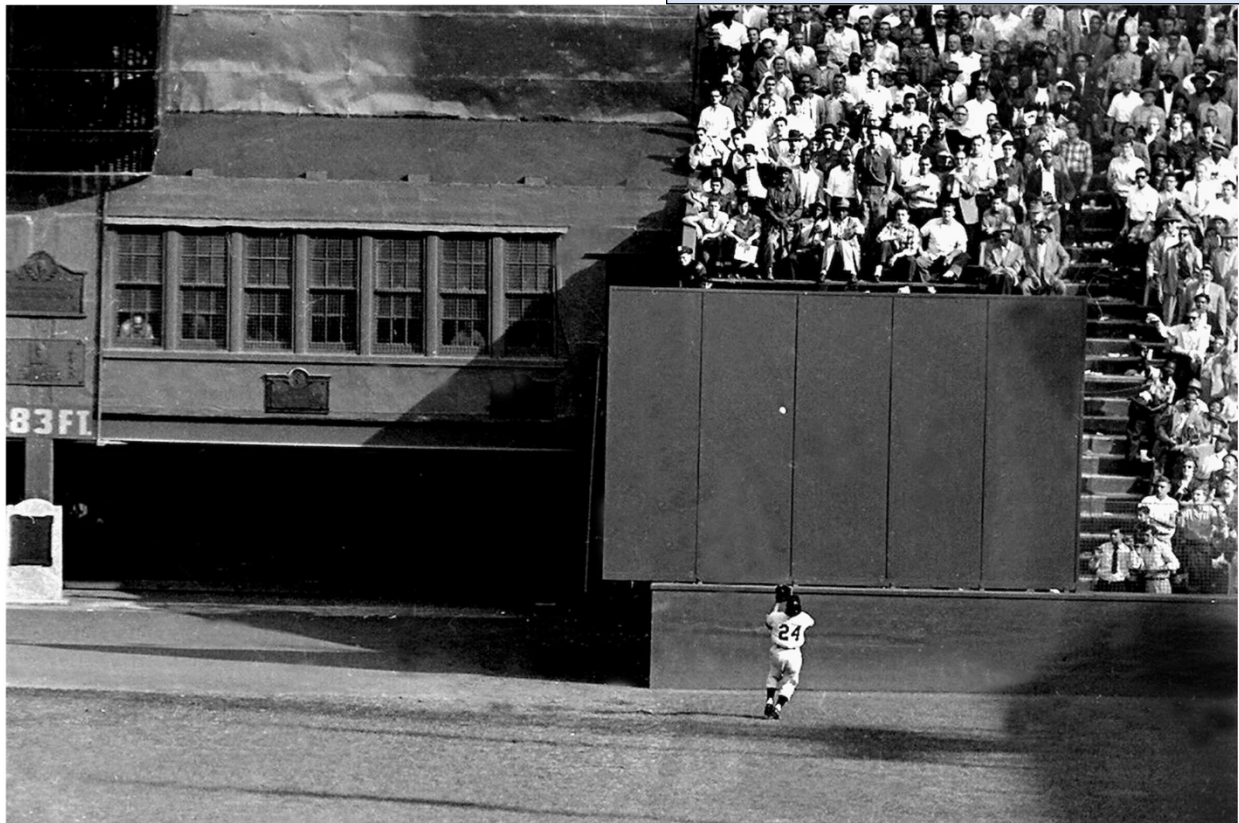


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"The Catch": Mr. Mays, running full tilt about 450 feet from home plate in the Polo Grounds' vast center field, hauls in a drive by Cleveland's Vic Wertz in Game 1 of the 1954 World Series. It is one of the most celebrated plays in baseball history. (New York Daily News archive via Getty Images)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2024/06/18/willie-mays-baseball-dead/>

‘The Catch’

Mr. Mays’s most famous defensive play lives in lore as “The Catch,” against the Cleveland Indians in the 1954 World Series opener.

It was an over-the-shoulder grab of a smash by Vic Wertz late in a 2-2 game, with two Cleveland runners on base. Mr. Mays sprinted deep into the valley of center field at the Polo Grounds, his back to the infield, and somehow tracked the ball as it rocketed above and directly behind him. He caught it in full stride just shy of the wall, about 450 feet from home plate.

Because of the Polo Grounds’ uniquely vast center field, it was not unheard of for a runner to tag up and score from second base on a flyout as far as Wertz’s. The Say Hey Kid had done it several times himself. However, with runners on first and second and one out after The Catch, Mr. Mays delivered the ball to the infield in a flash, whirling and falling to his knees (and losing his cap) as he unleashed “the throw of a howitzer made human,” one observer wrote. It preserved the tie.

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DiMaggio, who had retired three years earlier, witnessed the play from the press box. According to Hirsch, “Joltin’ Joe” marveled at Mr. Mays’s courage, barreling so close to the concrete wall, halting only when the ball landed in his glove. But Mr. Mays, as intelligent a player as he was physically gifted, said he wasn’t worried about a crash in his gallop toward the warning track. He was thinking further ahead.

“Soon as it got hit, I knew I’d catch this ball,” he explained. “ ... The problem was [Cleveland’s] Larry Doby on second base. ... Suppose I stop and turn and throw. I will get nothing on the ball. No momentum going into my throw,” and Doby might have scored, giving his team the lead. “To keep my momentum, to get it working for me, I have to turn very hard and short and throw the ball from exactly the point that I caught it.”



Sports scribes would write that Mr. Mays made the lightning throw instinctively, a term that irked him. “All the while I’m runnin’ back, I’m planning how to get off that throw,” he told Hirsch. “The momentum goes into my turn and up through my legs and into my throw.”

Doby stopped at third base and, three batters later, the top of the eighth inning ended with the game still knotted. In the 10th, Mr. Mays walked, stole second and scored on a home run, and the underdog Giants went on to sweep the Series.

For Mr. Mays, it was the second of four trips to the Fall Classic and his only championship. He won his only batting title in that 1954 season, with a .345 average, and the first of his two National League Most Valuable Player awards. The World Series MVP trophy, named after Mr. Mays since 2017, is a bronze rendering of The Catch.