Mays, Willie (Howard)

(b. May 6, 1931, Westfield, Ala., U.S.), American professional National League baseball player who was notable for his batting and fielding.

Both Mays's father and grandfather had been baseball players. Willie, who batted and fielded right-handed, played semiprofessional baseball when he was 16 years old and joined the Birmingham Black Barons of the Negro National League in 1948, playing only on Sunday during the school year. The National League New York Giants paid the Barons for his contract when he graduated from Fairfield Industrial High School in 1950. After two seasons in the minor leagues, Mays went to the Giants in 1951. He became known first for his spectacular leaping and diving catches before he established himself as a hitter. He served in the army (1952-54), and in the 1954 season, when the Giants won the National League pennant and the World Series, Mays led the league in hitting (.345) and had 41 home runs. In 1966 his two-year contract with the Giants (moved to San Francisco in 1958) gave him the highest salary of any baseball player of that time. He was traded to the New York Mets midseason in 1972 and retired after the 1973 season. Late in his career he played in the infield, mainly at first base. His career home run total was 660 and his batting average .302. He led the league in home runs in 1955, 1962, and 1964-65.

After retiring as a player, Mays was a part-time coach and did public relations work for the Mets. In 1979 Mays took a public relations job with a company that was involved in gambling concerns, with the result that he was banned from baseball-related activities just three months after he was elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame. In 1985 the ban was lifted, and in 1986 Mays became a full-time special assistant to the Giants.