

Aaron tribute will be Atlanta All-Star Game's enduring moment

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ATLANTA

Not many of the 41,702 who filled Truist Park will remember the All-Star Game's score. They may remember it was decided in a home-run derby reminiscent of a soccer penalty-kick shootout after the score was tied at 6-6 at the end of nine innings. (The National League won in the first-ever swing-off.) But maybe nearly all of them will remember one moment from the 95th All-Star Game - the breathtaking tribute to Hank Aaron's record-breaking 715th home run.

Well done, MLB, in honoring the historic triumph of a noble and beloved Atlantan in such a stunning manner. The re-creation of the historic home run, including video of the at-bat projected onto the infield played over audio clips of Milo Hamilton and Vin Scully's immortal calls of the record breaker with text of the calls cast onto the field, was captivating.

“Actually, it blew me away,” said Raghu Kakarala of Decatur, Ga., as he and his son Avi walked out of the stadium after the game. “I’ve seen that done in the NBA on the court before, but we were trans-fixed, and we had a perfect view.”

The next-level details were the pyrotechnic shot off from home plate tracing the arc of Aaron's blast to left field on April 8, 1974, at Atlanta Stadium and

Aaron's footsteps around the bases projected onto the basepaths while video of the home run was cast onto the diamond through a technique called projection mapping, all synchronized flawlessly.

At the end, as fans roared their approval for the tribute, Aaron's widow, Billye Aaron, appeared on the video board. As she serenely waved to fans from her seat at the stadium, the volume rose even more.

Perfect is a word that ought to be saved for the rarest of occasions, but this might have qualified. You just wish that Aaron, who died in January 2021 at the age of 86, could witness the tribute himself.

It was a most fitting celebration. In baseball's singular regular-season event, when the sport stops to celebrate the game's best, MLB honored an all-time great in his team's home stadium by re-creating the moment when he shattered a record many thought to be unbreakable, one that carried cultural meaning far beyond the sporting significance.

It is hard to believe that it didn't register and captivate anyone who saw it, either live or on television.

Kakarala, the fan who was overwhelmed at the tribute, wore a Braves No. 44 jersey in Aaron's honor. Kakarala's admiration goes far beyond home runs, recognizing Aaron's bravery as a civil rights activist, service as a philanthropist and fundamental decency as a human.

Born in 1971, Kakarala was not old enough to have

seen Aaron play - and he actually grew up in Ohio, not making Atlanta his home until 1998. But he grew to admire Aaron to the point that he named his ad agency "44" in Aaron's honor and instituted a service day every April 4 (4/4).

"He embodied everything you'd want about the game, about the city," Kakarala said.

The commemoration was the brainchild of Hall of Famer and Yankees pitching great C.C. Sabathia, now working as a special assistant to commissioner Rob Manfred.

A year ago, he noticed a serendipity of timing. The 2025 All-Star Game would be in Atlanta and the numerical dates of the Home Run Derby and All-Star Game would be 7/14 and 7/15. He suggested to MLB leadership that it honor No. 715 on 7/15 in a thoughtful and tasteful way.

“Everything he meant to that city, to that organization, not only from being a player, to being an executive and all the guys he helped mentor through that organization,” Sabbathia told ESPN about honoring Aaron. “I think he should always be honored ... the guys that I stand on the back of, I’m going to always make sure they’re getting honored.”

Besides the tribute, MLB paid homage to both Ruth and Aaron in Monday's Home Run Derby. In the event, National League sluggers wore Aaron's No. 44, while American Leaguers wore Ruth's No. 3. One further touch of magic:



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Three F-35s fly over Truist Park prior to the MLB All-Star Game at Truist Park on Tuesday in Atlanta. A tribute to Atlanta Braves great Hank Aaron was presented during the sixth inning.

Ruth hit his final home runs, including 714, as a member of the Boston Braves, the franchise that Aaron ultimately became the face of.

Last fall, MLB's Game Presentation Group put

together a creative brief that was sent to three prospective companies. MLB went with Baltimore-based Image Engineering, which specializes in visual experiences using special effects including audio/visual,

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