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Mays: Bonds will break homer mark — if he plays



"Football was my best sport; baseball was my last sport," Willie Mays told the audience at the Senior Boomer Expo Wednesday at the Tennessee State Fairgrounds. Mays took questions and raffled off autographed baseballs following his speech. SHAUNA BITTLE / THE TENNESSEAN

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Reminiscing about the past was no problem for Willie Mays. Looking into the future, though, wasn't something the baseball Hall of Famer had much taste for Wednesday during an appearance at the Senior Boomer Expo.

Mays, who retired as the third-all-time home run hitter in 1973, was at the Tennessee State Fairgrounds in his capacity as a spokesman for HealthSpring. But as he

addressed the crowd of all ages, he made them aware it wasn't his first trip to Nashville.

"I played ball here, a long time ago, over at Sulphur Dell," Mays said, referring to the park where the old Nashville Vols played into the 1960s.

With 660 career homers, Mays has slipped to fourth — trailing Babe Ruth's 714 and Hank Aaron's all-time record of 755, as well as Barry Bonds, who finished the 2006 season with 734.

Mays, who has a lifetime contract with the San Francisco Giants, played alongside the late Bobby Bonds, Barry's dad, and Mays is Barry's godfather. However, the 75-year-old said he doesn't have much insight into the younger Bonds' plans for next year.

"When Barry and I talk, we don't talk baseball; we don't get involved in that," Mays said. "If he plays, I think he will (break Aaron's record). He may not play next year. He was hurt all year. I think he's going to play somewhere — if not for the Giants, somewhere.

"Barry's his own man. If he chooses to play and he says to me he's going somewhere else, I'll try to be there for him. I don't try to sway him one way or the other. I'd like for him to be with the Giants."

Mays spent the first 20 years of his career with the Giants, including the move from New York to San Francisco, before a May 1972 trade sent him to the Mets for his final two seasons.

"Football was my best sport," he said. "I played quarterback, but I didn't play because I thought I'd get hurt. Those guys get hit a lot. Baseball was the easiest of the three to me. I thought I could play that for 20 years."

Not only did he play longer than he'd projected, but he also played better than most, earning first-ballot induction into the Hall of Fame in 1979 by receiving 95 percent of the total votes cast.

"I was mad," he recalled of his initial reaction. "There were 23 guys that didn't vote for me? How could you have a vote and not vote for me?"

"But it was a wonderful feeling. I was very gratified." n

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