

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

After a slight delay...Cubs to give Dawson alumni ring

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Almost every autograph seeker approaching Fergie Jenkins in the back room at Skokie's Village Inn the other night asked to see the Hall of Famer's Cubs World Series ring.

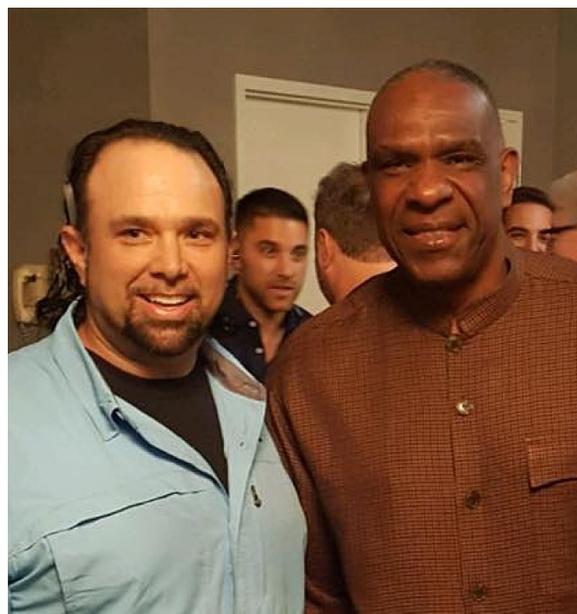
The bling was like a magic talisman. From a grandma in a walker to kids, they asked to try on the ring, taking a photo with the always-affable Jenkins. The ring simply gave off its own aura. That's what a once-in-two-lifetimes achievement will do for a massive, grateful fan base.

Now it will be Andre Dawson's turn to share his ring with fans. After an apparent communications mixup and an inquiry from the Chicago Baseball Museum, fellow Hall of Famer Dawson will receive the jewelry this season. The June 5-7 visit by the Miami Marlins, for whom Dawson works as a special assistant to the president, might be the date he gets the ring. A lifelong Miami resident, Dawson almost always ensures he comes back to his beloved Wrigley Field when the Marlins play in Chicago.

Better a little late than never.

A group of lesser-light ex-Cubs got alumni rings and sang in the seventh inning from a Wrigley Field suite. I inquired if Dawson had heard from the Cubs about his own ring. When the answer was negative, I then contacted Cubs spokesman Julian Green about the apparent omission.

Green finally responded by e-mail after a second attempt to reach him. He did not mention former Cubs MVP Dawson by name. But the wording of his message seemed a real downer: awarding of alumni rings was, among other criteria, based on the number of seasons the player performed as a Cub, and also the number of Cubs Conventions he attended.



Andre Dawson with Champaign sports promoter Mike Namoff (left) at a recent event.

Dawson's seeming exclusion while the likes of Scott Sanderson, Steve Trout and Bobby Dernier got rings did not sit well with anyone informed of the action, or non-action. All knew how much Dawson loved the Cubs and Wrigley Field – and how he ranked in the Top Ten of impact players in team history.

Dawson so strongly wanted to come to Chicago he signed a blank contract – Dallas Green filling in a \$500,000 base salary – in spring training 1987, amid the owners' collusion era. He earned every penny, and then some, by winning the 1987 MVP award with 49 homers, bathed in the undying love of Cubs fans and credited his time in Wrigley Field for his 2010 election to the Hall of Fame.



The Cubs' alumni ring belonging to Fergie Jenkins.

He wanted to have a Cubs cap on his Hall of Fame plaque, but the institution mandated a Montreal Expos hat instead. A year later, Hall officials changed the dictum to permit an inductee to not even show a team logo on his honoree cap. Greg Maddux and Tony La Russa were inducted in 2014 without a team symbol on their cap images.

The Hall of Fame apparently performed a make-good on the cap issue to Dawson. He was the first Cooperstown inductee contacted to help Hall boss Jeff Idelson give President Barack Obama a tour of the exhibits three years ago.

Dawson's offensive numbers and Gold Glove right field play, done amid the pain of surgery-scarred knees, blew away any other non-Hall of Fame Cubs alumni ring recipients. He played six seasons as a Cub, same number as Sanderson and Jose Cardenal, and longer than Trout and Dernier. His character was off the charts as a true Southern gentleman whose word was his bond. Only on the issue of convention attendance did he fall short. That appeared to be a flimsy reason for awarding rings, as for decades the Cubs tended to invite the same core of 1969 and 1984 veterans to the mid-January fan fest. Where were achievers like George Altman and Dick Ellsworth all those years?

Ricketts staged party at Cooperstown

The apparent Dawson snub made even less sense when Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts, who watched Dawson's prime years from his right-field bleacher seat, held a party at Cooperstown for Dawson's induction. Weeks later, the Cubs staged a celebratory ceremony at home plate at Wrigley Field with Tom and sister Laura Ricketts on hand.

Most recently, Dawson participated in throwing-out-first-pitches ceremonies in both the 2016 NLCS and World Series. He attended both Games 4 and 5 in the Fall Classic, with TV cameras showing great pleasure and relief on his often-intense "Hawk" face.

After the Dawson story was posted here, the wheels turned a lot faster. Dawson and the Cubs finally connected, and he was informed he'd be awarded a ring. During a busy spring training for Dawson, the Cubs had tried to reach him about his 2017 schedule coming to Chicago. The two parties did not connect then, but it is not known if a ring awarding was on the docket on the Cubs' end in their attempt to reach Dawson.



Almost all autograph seekers, ranging from grandmothers to young children, wanted to try on Fergie Jenkins' alumni ring when he conducted a recent signing in suburban Skokie.

Bottom line, the bling thing is the real deal. However it got done is what counts. A common response of people informed of the ring-less Dawson was the Cubs would surely re-consider. Jenkins “definitely” believed Dawson was ring-worthy.

“There are a few guys who really deserve it.” he said.

Still another Cooperstown enshrinee with whom Jenkins shares retired No. 31, run up a Wrigley Field flagpole, should also get himself fitted for a ring. Greg Maddux earned just one ring as an Atlanta Brave, the team to which he defected as a free agent in 1992. But with two Cubs tenures as a player and another in the front office, Mad Dog – who never really wanted to leave Chicago in the first place – should be a slam-dunk recipient.

Still, the widespread dissemination of 1,908 rings (the number matching the previous Cubs championship season) to employees, including ushers and Wrigley Field tour guides, will spark debate Hall of Fame style. Someone, plural, will always be left out.

Beckert gets ring, but not Kessinger

“Don Kessinger didn’t get a ring,” Jenkins said of his reliable ol’ shortstop. “What about Big Daddy (Rick Reuschel)?”

Reuschel, a home-grown Cub and pride of Camp Point, Ill., went on from his Cubs pitching days to serve a stint as president of the Pirates Alumni Association after his late-career days with the Buccos. The Cubs do not field a comparable formal ex-player outfit. Reuschel has cast his lot with the Black and Gold, as a Pittsburgh resident, so his identification with the Cubs has been diluted.

Kessinger is an interesting case, though. Glenn Beckert, his Cubs double-play partner for nine seasons (1965-73), was awarded a ring. However, Kessinger played two more seasons than Beckert in Chicago. At a level just below all-timer Ernie Banks, Kessinger surely ranks with Joe Tinker and Billy Jurgens in the pantheon of all Cubs shortstops, especially with his “boarding-house reach” in the field.

How do you split hairs here?

In the end, Kessinger was just as much a gentleman as Dawson.

“Beckert and I were friends,” Kessinger said from his family’s real-estate office in Oxford, Miss. “He called me the other day, and he was thrilled he was getting a ring. I’m



Present-day real-estate man Don Kessinger did not get a ring, in contrast to nine-year Cubs double-play partner Glenn Beckert.

extremely happy for him. I did not go to as many conventions as Beckert. Whatever the criteria, I felt I was a great part of Cubs history.

“The Good Lord has been great to me.”

Here’s an idea. The Cubs cannot award rings to everyone. And yet team leader Anthony Rizzo said during the Grant Park championship rally every Cubs player in history had a hand in the eventual championship. Nobody should be left out.

Instead of a traditional Old-Timers Game, in which overage players attempt to revive long-dormant muscles, batting and moving in slow motion, the Cubs should simply invite 100 to 150 alumni to Wrigley Field, divided over a number of games. Have them parade on the field pre-game with acknowledgements from the 2016 World Series veterans. Give them a certificate or something honorary signed by Rizzo. That way, past and present meld in the manner Rizzo sketched out.

As many former Cubs as possible thus would get a piece of the pie, even if it wasn’t bejeweled. I cannot tell you how many ex-players over the decades asked me how to wrangle an invitation to the Cubs Convention. They were never called. But now they would come from far and wide to bask in the leftover glory.

The concept of “We Are Family” should not have been limited to the 1979 Pirates. The Cubs made a good start with Dawson. Keep going, boys.