

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Baines consistent, but not quite up to HOF standards

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Harold Baines' turn at-bat comes up this week.

The quiet, even-keel all-time White Sox discovered by Bill Veeck in Little League likely will hit an impressive drive – to the warning track – in the vote for the Hall of Fame, through no fault of his own.

Baines had a long, consistent career. But never spectacular, never an MVP, never a home-run or RBI leader. Worse of all, an almost silent type when it came to tooting his own horn. I will never forget Les Grobstein always sputtering over Baines' near-mute post-game status. Those mic jockeys were under pressure to deliver decent sound bites to their radio stations, and Baines' would not cooperate.

Pushed off the Baseball Writers Association ballot over time, Baines' credentials have been remanded to the Today's Game committee, considering candidates who participated in MLB from 1988 onward. Today's Game is the latest incarnation of the old Veterans Committee. Players have had better luck with the BBWAA. The Veterans Committee and all its successors have only elected a handful of candidates, including the late Ron Santo in a 2011 guilt-trip, in the last 15 years.

The 75 percent vote threshold for enshrinement is one crucial barrier. Dick Allen came close, but no cigar, last year. Minnie Minoso also was within hailing distance. But no other high-profile institution requires a $\frac{3}{4}$ vote as does the Hall of Fame and its two electoral processes.

Baines also is the lowest-profile candidate in a field loaded with executives.

His player competitors are Albert Belle, his exact opposite on the decibel level, along with Will Clark, Orel Hershiser and Mark McGwire. Managers are Sweet Lou Piniella and Davey Johnson. Executives are retired commissioner Bud Selig, Royals/Braves impresario John Schuerholz and the late Boss himself, George Steinbrenner (wonder what he would have thought of President-elect Trump?).

On the basis of being an impact player, Baines would lose out to McGwire, who in turn will shed potential votes because of his involvement in the PEDs era. Analyzing Baines'



Harold Baines fell just short of being the kind of dominant player worthy of Hall of Fame election.

HOF worthiness, he almost is a header for Shawn Anderson's Hall of Very Good. He never had a dominant season, never won an MVP award or batting title. He just was like Ol' Man River, rolling along for two decades.

To be sure, Baines' overall numbers compare with Hall of Famer Billy Williams, another lower-vocal-level guy. "Whistler" had a .290 lifetime average with 2,711 hits and 1,475 RBIs. Baines had 2,866 hits and 1,628 RBIs. In three different Sox tenures, Baines racked up 221 homers amid 1,773 hits.

Power and impact seasons tipped Williams into the Hall compared to Baines' just falling short. Williams had 426 homers to Baines' 384. Baines' top power season was 29 with the 1984 Sox. He reached the 25 mark just two other times. Williams got to 30 or more five times. His 1965 season featured 34 homers and 203 hits. "Whistler" had two MVP-worthy seasons that fell just short of Triple Crown status in 1970 and 1972. In '70 he was a one-man wrecking crew with 42 homers, 129 RBIs, 137 runs scored, 205 hits and a .322 average. Two years later Williams won the NL batting title with .333 to go along with 37 homers and 122 RBIs.

Once a great right fielder with nearly five tools, Baines settled in as a designated hitter the final half of his career. When you are out there just four times a game, you lose a lot of momentum in the rating of future Hall of Fame voters. Better to be a two-way player than not.

Just a hunch – I believe Selig gets elected by this group. Despite the guff the Milwaukeean and childhood Cubs fan takes for presiding over the PED era before cracking down in 2003, he'll be looked at as a man who moved the game forward with more significant changes than almost all his predecessor commissioners. Selig prompted the wild card and interleague play, and finally supported video replay after years of resistance. Most importantly, he convinced both sides labor peace was necessary to the game's survival after the 1994 strike had baseball staring straight into the abyss.

Selig should have a base of support among the electorate comprising the Today's Game voters. The panel includes Hall of Famers Frank Thomas, Robert Alomar, Bobby Cox, Andre Dawson, Dennis Eckersley, Pat Gillick, Ozzie Smith and Don Sutton; major league executives Andy MacPhail (Phillies and former Cubs president), Paul Beeston (Blue Jays), Bill DeWitt (Cardinals), David Glass (Royals) and Kevin Towers (Reds), and veteran media members/historians Tim Kurkjian (ESPN), Bill Center (San Diego baseball writer) and Steve Hirdt (Elias Sports Bureau).

The 10 Today's Game Era finalists were selected by the BBWAA-appointed Historical Overview Committee from all eligible candidates among managers, umpires, executives



Just a hunch that Bud Selig, with Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf (right), wins election by the Today's Game voters.

and long-retired players. Eligible candidates included players who played in at least 10 major league seasons along with managers, umpires and executives with 10 or more years in baseball.

The Historical Overview Committee is comprised of 11 veteran historians: Hirdt, Bob Elliott (*Canadian Baseball Network*), Jim Henneman (formerly *Baltimore Sun*), Rick Hummel (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*), Bill Madden (formerly *New York Daily News*), Jack O'Connell (BBWAA), Jim Reeves (formerly *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*), Tracy Ringolsby (*MLB.com*), Glenn Schwarz (formerly *San Francisco Chronicle*); Dave Van Dyck (formerly *Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun-Times*) and Mark Whicker (*Los Angeles News Group*).