



Jim Thome far outdoes youthful role-model Kingman for HOF character

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It's not common a pro athlete far exceeds his childhood role model.

In Jim Thome's case, it's quite fortunate.

A favorite to be inducted into the 2018 Hall of Fame Class Jan. 24, the genial slugger-turned-special assistant with the White Sox grew up in Peoria admiring Cubs strongman Dave Kingman. Good thing Thome greatly exceeded both King's power totals intermixed with prodigious strikeouts *and* questionable character traits.

Kingman finished with 442 homers, 1816 strikeouts and just 608 walks. His lifetime on-base percentage was a weak .302 with a .236 average.

Thome's 612 homers were accompanied by 2,548 strikeouts. Just as strong as Kingman, he could air-condition the ballpark with anyone. However, Thome also drew 1,747 walks, amassing a .402 on-base percentage with a .276 average.

But the issue of character, a prime prerequisite for Cooperstown enshrinement, separates baseball's men from the boys.

Kingman's personal demons and family background prompted him to shun the media, not show up at his own T-shirt day at Wrigley Field in 1980, dump ice water in spring training on Daily Herald Cubs writer Don Friske and send a caged rat to Athletics beat writer Susan Fornoff.

Where do we start with Thome, at 47 long settled in the southwest suburbs, an easy two-hour plus drive from Peoria? In addition to gladly helping players coming up behind him, the good citizen outside baseball contributed \$100,000 to tornado relief for battered Washington, Ill, near his hometown, during the holiday season in 2013. And that's only the tip of the iceberg of the good things Thome has done for others.



Jim Thome's power was directly responsible for the White Sox's last postseason appearance.

Production alone HOF-worthy

Thome's career body of work amid a bumper crop of home-grown hitters with the Cleveland Indians, then the Philadelphia Phillies, nearly four seasons with the White Sox, Los Angeles Dodgers, Minnesota Twins and Baltimore Orioles should automatically nail down his induction. He needed to just have average character, just stay out of trouble, with his numbers.

But in pure decency and downhome grounded-ness, Thome will be one of the better character men ushered into baseball's highest honors.

He started out mimicking Kingman amid a family of Cubs fans – “black-sheep” brother Randy the Cardinals-rooter exception – in central Illinois in 1978-80 as a grade schooler. He imagined himself Kingman swinging the bat in those three Cubs seasons of ups and downs for the 6-foot-6 left fielder.



Dave Kingman's massive swing and power inspired a young Jim Thome in Peoria. But Thome far out-did Kingman in production and plate discipline.

“We played with the tennis ball against the brick building,” Thome once said. “I liked the way Kingman hit the ball out of the ballpark. Dave Kingman was one of those guys who were all or nothing. My dad loved him. I had this obsession with Kingman.”

When parents Chuck and Joyce Thome drove their son to see a game at Wrigley Field, they passed by Belmont Harbor. The younger Thome eagerly looked out the window at the mass of boats. He heard Kingman had a boat. What he did not know was Kingman went out fishing so early in the morning he had to nap in Tony Garofalo's tiny trainer's room at Wrigley Field to be wakeful for the 1:30 p.m. start.

Once at the ballpark, the Thomes suddenly lost track of their son. He disappeared. Suddenly, a big, burly Cub retrieved him. He had sneaked into the dugout in search of Kingman.

“Barry Foote ended up carrying me out,” he said. “It was a great story. It was like any kid – when they have a player they admire, they'll do anything to get their favorite players' autograph. That's how I was.”

Thome would have sports on the brain. It was in his blood. Family members, including his aunt, were avid softball players. They'd drive an hour from day-shift factory jobs in Peoria to the Quad Cities for evening games.

Left-field hitting amateur player

Thome was a pretty good basketball player himself at Limestone High School in Peoria suburb Bartonville. But he initially did not wow baseball scouts. He was described as a wrong-field-hitting shortstop without a lot of power coming out of Illinois Central Col-

lege in East Peoria. He did not get a sniff from his favored Cubs, who craved for home-grown power in 1989. Finally the Cleveland Indians picked him in the 13th round.

Future manager Charlie Manuel smoothed out Thome's stroke, getting him to pull more. But he never lost that left- and center approach. At the peak of his career, he was rated as having the best center-field power in the game.

Coming to Wrigley Field in the mid-2000s with the Phillies, I asked Thome if he could reach the faraway center-field scoreboard. He said no, that was beyond his range. But if any man could ever reach the green-and-white edifice, Thome would be the one.

He was a man-of-the-moment hitter. Sure, he scouted pitchers. Sure, he watched video. But nothing compared with the process of stepping into the box and taking your hacks.

"Sure, you know that guy; you know what he's got; you know what pitches he throws," Thome said. "It's like watching video. You can watch video all day long, but (it is not enough) until the minute you dig in and get that experience."

Thome became a man at home with the White Sox after coming over in a trade for center fielder Aaron Rowand after the 2005 season. Rowand's leadership and defensive prowess were a huge loss, but Thome's presence was hardly the reason the Sox kept falling short of a return Fall Classic visit.

Puts it on the board for Blackout Game

His well-struck solo homer – to center – permitted John Danks to win a tense 1-0 decision over the Minnesota Twins on Sept. 30 at G-Rate Field in the famed "Blackout Game" AL Central tie-breaker to send the Sox to the 2008 AL Division Series. A bit more than a year earlier, on Sept. 16, 2007 and also at home, Thome slugged his 500th career homer, a two-run walk-off against the Los Angeles Angels. Thome's home-run output in his Sox seasons were successively 42, 35, 34 and 23 before being shipped off in a pennant-stretch deal with the Dodgers.

Thome was freshly retired in 2013 when Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf brought him back as a special assistant. Reinsdorf believed he has potential as a future manager.

"If an opportunity was to come up like that, then I think you definitely have to listen," Thome said.



Jim Thome worked with a youth player at the Bulls-Sox Academy in Lisle, Ill. in 2013. He returned to the Sox organization soon after retirement.

He also worked as a part-time studio analyst for MLB Network.

But giving back and helping others is foremost in any role Thome serves. Randy Thome lived in Washington, Ill., escaping unscathed. But a close relative living in the tornado-ravaged community was not the motivation to help the small city.

“You put things in perspective as easy as, ‘OK, I’m going to brush my teeth tonight.’” he said. “But the toothbrush is gone. It’s the little things that put into perspective of the damage that was really done. I couldn’t believe it. There were cars in trees. There was just debris everywhere. It looked like the whole half of the town of Washington was leveled.

“I’ve never have been in one. It puts everything into perspective after. Obviously, having it hit so close. Then realizing what are these families going to do 10 days or seven days away from Thanksgiving?”

Four of Thome’s teams, including the Sox, joined him in contributing to the relief effort. And that won’t be the last time he helps others.

Saints and scoundrels populate the Hall of Fame. We know which side Thome will be on.