

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Sosa likely not HOF material continuing on straight and narrow path*

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Sammy, we still hardly know ye.

In your quiet retirement, we don't know what you have done to build bridges back to the Cubs. Another Cubs Convention is being staged without you and a Hall of Fame vote announced again without your candidacy in hailing distance of election.

Now you have a prominent advocate for enshrinement into Cooperstown. USA Today baseball maven Bob Nightengale, a good guy, recently wrote that superstars strongly suspected of PEDs involvement 15 to 20 years ago be inducted into the Hall of Fame. Nightengale's pro-induction essay now has become an annual appeal, centered around inducting Barry Bonds – a very strong PED candidate given his pre- and post-prime body inflation and deflation – and Roger Clemens.

One of the key arguments is Bonds and Clemens were so good and productive even before suspected PED use that they merit Hall of Fame induction on the basis of those standards. Nightengale and co-philosophers do have a point, but the cryin' shame is Bonds and Clemens apparently did not agree in the heat of battle to just let nature take its course.

Sammy, I'm not so sure. Without any artificial enhancements, Sosa might have headed for the Hall of the Very Good at best.

First up, here's the evidence. Sosa bulked up dramatically as the Nineties waned and his power numbers zoomed into the 60-homer range three out of four seasons. His arm strength declined, no doubt due to the bulking up, from a reasonable "seven" to a sub-par "four" in scouts' ratings over one off-season. After his 66-homer season in 1998, he flit around the globe so much in celebration he had no time for regular weight-training.

No longer did Sosa proclaim his earlier-career goals as a 30-30 man, which included gold chains with the numerical goals of the erstwhile "Panther," his nickname from White Sox days in honor of his lithe, athletic, speedy physique. Playing him as a regular center fielder in his first Cubs season in 1992 seemed reasonable. Yet his placement in



**Sammy Sosa may not have been Hall of Fame-worthy if his statistical path had not inflated into the stratosphere in the late 1990s.**

center on Aug. 8, 1998 in Busch Stadium II to accommodate Glenallen Hill in right and Henry Rodriguez in left – a true dreadnought outfield -- was greeted with controversy due to his perceived loss of speed amid his physical inflation.

Sosa made career gains early as a Cub. After a '92 season fractured by injuries, he finally became a 30-30 man (33 homers, 36 steals) in 1993. Sosa batted .300 in strike-shortened in 1994, after which he almost left the Cubs as a free agent for the Red Sox – a deal negated by the court-imposed strike settlement. He drove in 119 runs on the back of 36 homers in 1995. He added 34 steals. And in 1996, the improvement continued as he left the lineup for the rest of the season on Aug. 20, 1996, due to a broken wrist, leading the NL with 40 homers. He was on a season pace for 52.

At that juncture, Sosa might have gone on to a productive career, perhaps into the mid-400 homer range. Within sight of traditional Hall of Fame standards, but not quite getting past the threshold.

Where was the demarcation point for the connection to PEDs? Circumstantial evidence points to 1997. Sosa got a megabucks new multi-year contract in the middle of '97 that boosted his pay to more than \$8 million for 1998. But in spite of 36 homers and 119 RBIs, he slumped to a .251 with his strikeouts dramatically up to what would turn out to be a career high of 174. Proud and vainglorious, Sosa surely had to feel the pressure of living up to his shiny new contract.

Defending Sosa, he did make alterations in his swing and approach under the tutelage of hitting coach Jeff Pentland going into 1998. He stopped flailing at far outside, unhittable pitches. More discipline and his natural power enabled him to cover the plate to hit strikes, going to the opposite field with authority and making pitchers respect him much more. He'd hit at least .308 three of the next four years.

But the mysterious aura under which he operated, the possession of likely multiple corked bats in 2003, the stonewalling of manager Dusty Baker's attempt to drop him in the order in mid-season 2004 and his final-day walkout in '04 still stain Sosa. He has distanced himself from re-approachment with the Cubs and in the passing the smell test of character of Cooperstown candidates. That is, unless he comes clean with the truth of what actually happened. Asking for forgiveness and admitting transgressions goes a long way even in our increasingly dystopian society.

Nightengale reasoned that murderers and racists populate the Hall of Fame. So do cheaters, via pitchers who greased and cut the ball, hitters who used corked bats and anyone who cut corners in the ultimate game of failure.

Yet it's never too late to apply apologetic behavior and a sense of humility to get in the good graces of the majority. That quality is always welcomed, from the White House to Cooperstown to the baseball press boxes.



**You may not make the same argument for Sammy Sosa as Bob Nightengale, pictured here, makes for Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens.**