



*Cubs outfielder Andre Dawson rates serious Hall of Fame consideration.*

## Close calls for the Hall

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The results of the annual Hall of Fame vote will be known at 1 p.m. (Chicago time) on Monday, and this much is certain: The announcement will trigger lots of serious discussion around the baseball world in the weeks ahead. By my count, of the 23 candidates on the ballot, a reasonable case can be made for nine of them.

The list includes four players who spent substantial parts of their careers in Chicago - Harold Baines, Andre Dawson, Mark Grace, Tommy John and Lee Smith. In particular, Dawson and Smith deserve close looks. In 21 seasons, Dawson totaled 2,774 hits, 438 home runs and eight Gold Gloves. In 18 seasons, Smith saved 478 games, the third most in major league history. He led the league in saves four times.

As impressive as their career resumes are, they're sort of like a Chinese buffet - they leave me to want more.



The signature moment for Dawson was the 1987 season, when he established career highs in home runs (49), RBI (137) and slugging percentage (.568), numbers that he didn't approach before or after then. Hawk also was awarded National League Most Valuable Player honors, but that he did so with a last-place Cubs team takes some of the luster off his greatest achievement. A career .279-hitter, Dawson totaled 30-or-more homers in three seasons and had 100-or-more RBI in four others.

Smith loses points because of his 71-92 career record, although in fairness, he pitched for his share of less-than-mediocre teams. As consistent as the former Cubs closer was for years, he was rarely a serious Cy Young Award candidate. His best finish was a distant second place.

If either Dawson or Smith had excelled in the postseason, then his cause would have been helped immensely. In limited chances, both were ineffective when the stakes were highest. In 15 games, Dawson hit .186 and zero homers. In four appearances, Smith had a 0-2 record and 8.44 earned run average.

My picks: Bert Blyleven and Jim Rice.

For years, I considered Blyleven to be a borderline candidate, and by my standards, close isn't good enough. So what put him over the top finally? The more I dissected his numbers, the more I became convinced that few if any pitchers were victimized more by the subpar talent around him.

The rap against Blyleven is that he failed to win 300 games or a Cy Young Award in his career. But if the Dutch treat had pitched for even average teams throughout his career, then I'm convinced that his 287-250 record would be at least 15 games better and he would have at least one Cy Young Award to his credit. In 22 seasons, he posted a better win percentage than his team in 13 of them, and one other time, the numbers were identical. What's more, Blyleven ranks fifth in strikeouts (3,701), ninth in shutouts (60) and 11th in games started (685) in major league history.

On the rare occasion when Blyleven did pitch for a contender, he was hardly a disappointment. In five postseason appearances, he turned in a 4-1 record and 2.87 ERA. Pure and simple, if Blyleven had not been around to anchor an otherwise ordinary rotation, then the 1987 Minnesota Twins would not have won it all.

This marks the 15th and final attempt for Rice, a fact that has more to do with his personality than performance, some will tell you. (This just in: Some media actually hold grudges!) What cannot be overlooked is that, from the 1975 to 1980 seasons, Rice was on the short list of feared sluggers in the game. In the six-year period, he hit .308, averaged 33 home runs and 109 RBI, was selected the American League Most Valuable Player once and finished among the top five three other times.

Rice was no less respected later in his career. In the 1986 World Series, his only Fall Classic appearance, he hit .333 and drew six walks in seven games.



A career .298-hitter and three-time home run champion, Rice would have put up better career numbers (2,452 hits, 382 homers, 1,451 RBI) had he not retired at 36 years of age. (For what it's worth, Rice ranks 89th on the all-time batting list, while Dawson is 121st overall, according to Baseball-Reference.com.)

Why did I leave Rickey Henderson and Mark McGwire off my ballot? It wasn't a numbers thing. It was a steroids thing. Whether they were users or not, the fact that Henderson, McGwire and Jose Canseco shared the same clubhouse for years strongly suggests that they were accomplices to the greatest scandal in baseball history. If Buck Weaver received a lifetime ban because he had knowledge of the 1919 World Series fix even if he didn't take part in it, then shouldn't those who were aware of rampant steroids abuse have to pay a price themselves?

Henderson will not be a unanimous selection in his first appearance on the ballot, but the all-time leader in runs scored and stolen bases shouldn't take it personally. Neither was anyone in the inaugural Hall of Fame class, and you may recognize their names -- Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner and Cy Young.

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