



In another homecoming, Hall of Famer Gossage to keynote Pitch 'N Hit Club Banquet

By George Castle, CBM historian

Goose Gossage may love the Big Sky of his Colorado home, then and now.

Make no mistake about it, he also adores the flatlands of Chicago that hold so many good memories early and late in his Hall of Fame pitching career.

“The people there, the Midwesterners, are salt of the earth people,” said the Goose, who will rub shoulders with hundreds of them at the Pitch ‘N Hit Club’s 67th Annual Awards Banquet Jan. 27 at the Carlisle in Lombard. Gossage will further entertain them as keynote speaker while also accepting the Lou Boudreau Hall of Fame Award for his great big-league achievements and Chicago connections.

“You’ve got the North Side and the South Side,” he said. “I played in both places. I loved both places.”

Yeah, even his under-performing 1988 season in Wrigley Field with the never-to-be forgotten sight of a grumpy, squat Don Zimmer, Popeye himself, half-waddling, half-marching to the mound to pull the Goose.

“I loved Comiskey Park. That was a grand old stadium....when they tore down Comiskey Park, I cried. And then playing in Wrigley was a tremendous experience. I didn’t have my greatest year there. Regardless, I have such fond memories of being in Chicago. So many firsts for me in Chicago was why it was so great. Everything happened in Chicago with the White Sox.”

The Goose was brought directly to the majors as a raw 20-year-old in 1972, straight from Class A Appleton, by Sox personnel chief Roland Hemond and manager Chuck Tanner. The brass fielded a right-lefty duo of the youngest, strongest arms in baseball with Gossage and southpaw Terry Forster. The kids were wide-eyed watching eventual American



Goose Gossage as a young Sox pitcher

League MVP Dick Allen almost single-handedly push the White Sox to a season-long AL West duel with the Oakland Athletics before falling just short in September.

Goose traded for Zisk, and then...

Gossage actually came into his own as a Sox pitcher. He had a 7-1 record setting up closer Forster in 1972. By 1975, he began dominating in late in the game with 26 saves and a 1.84 ERA. But an ill-advised move to take advantage of his rocket arm in the rotation backfired with a 9-17 mark for a bad Sox team in Bill Veeck's first year of his ownership comeback in 1976. Further aggravating his legacy was a late 1976 trade, when he was packaged with Forster to the Pittsburgh Pirates for rent-a-sluggger Richie Zisk and pitcher Silvio Martinez.

Gossage went on to play 22 seasons, pitch in 1,002 games and rack up 310 saves for nine teams. That was a surefire qualifier for the Boudreau Award, the top honor of the Pitch 'N Hit Club.

Past winners included Boudreau, Ernie Banks, George Brett, Jack Brickhouse, Harry Caray, Phil Cavarretta, John P. Carmichael, Andre Dawson, Dave Dombrowski, Red Faber, Bob Feller, Lefty Gomez, Will Harridge, Gabby Hartnett, Ernie Harwell, Roland Hemond, Jerome Holtzman, Randy Hundley, Fred Lindstrom, Johnny Logan, Ted Lyons, Minnie Minoso, Andy Pafko, Billy Pierce, Ryne Sandberg, Johnny Sain, Ron Santo, Ray Schalk, Moose Skowron, Steve Stone, Jim Thome, Billy Williams and Bill Veeck.

“The award is given for a person being in the game a long time, doing great things,” said Pete Caliendo, a past president of the Pitch 'N Hit Club who now serves on its board. Caliendo also is regional director (Great Lakes region) for USA Baseball – NTIS Program.

The award is doubly meritorious for Gossage because Chicago still burns as brightly as his time in Yankee Stadium, where he garnered his only World Series ring in 1978. Some of those memories and the emotion of the times no doubt will be recalled when Gossage, one of the most intimidating closers in history, delivers his keynote address. The task should be easy as Gossage speaks regularly about using baseball's best mental skills in life. He finished his Hall of Fame speech in one draft, amazing Rollie Fingers, who re-wrote his own address an estimated 100 times.

'I love' Chicago fans

“God, it holds a special place in my heart. I love those fans,” Goose said of Chicago. “It kicked off my career. It was just amazing. I still have to pinch myself that things happened the way they happened. I ran into people early on in my career that I need to run into to learn. They were so giving and such great teachers and coaches. To have that right out of the chute was just an amazing experience.”

Foremost among those mentors was Allen. In addition to being the best-all-around player in the majors in the early 1970s, the much-misunderstood Allen took kids like

Gossage under his wing – even though he was a veteran hitter and Gossage a rookie fireballer.

Allen counseled Gossage “from a great hitter’s standpoint” how to locate pitches and where hitters have trouble.

“It was an education all the money in the world couldn’t pay for,” Goose recalled. “Dick’s my idol. It was just an amazing experience. Dick and I lived in the same apartment complex. If I had to re-write it, there’s nothing I would change.

“I’ve never had a guy influence a clubhouse or team like Dick. He had the greatest season I ever saw a player have. That’s quite a statement. I played with some great players. He was the greatest baserunner, the greatest hitter, the most knowledgeable baseball person I’ve ever come into contact with. That’s really saying something.”

All the tumult of Allen’s career shortened his big-league stay and cut down on his already stellar numbers. No matter to Gossage – he believes Allen should join him in the Hall of Fame.

“All of those RBI’s he had, they’re not padded like these guys have today,” Goose said.

Allen, Tanner invited for Goose’s HOF celebration

Gossage never forgot Allen and Tanner, the manager in his first four big-league seasons. When he was finally enshrined in Cooperstown in 2008, he invited the duo to join him.

“Chuck was having some serious health issues at the time,” Goose recalled. “Those were the first two guys I invited to be my guests at the Hall of Fame. They drove from (western) Pennsylvania to Cooperstown and met me on the golf course. And then they had to get back (missing the induction ceremonies and speech the next day).

“That was the most special part of my Hall of Fame experience, to have them drive with Chuck having his health issues. It was a thrill. They came to talk to me and congratulate me. It meant so much to me. It was just kind of off the charts for me.”

Allen is not the only great of Gossage’s time that he wouldn’t mind joining as a Hall of Fame comrade. Ask him, and he backs the candidacy of Lee Arthur Smith, the closer Gossage replaced with the Cubs. Smith’s lack of World Series/postseason appearances probably has kept him out of Cooperstown despite 478 career saves.

“I don’t know how they’re going to keep him out,” Goose said. “He was on the bridge of multiple-innings closer. Closer wasn’t even a coined phrase when we were relief pitchers. We were (just plain) relief pitchers. He was right on that fence and he bridged that whole what it used to be to what it is today. He got in on part of that where there was just one inning (for a save). I think he belongs in the Hall of Fame.

“I think it was his laid-back kind of big ol’ mellow dude who came out of the bullpen (holding him back). I came out fiery. It took me eight years to get in (to Cooperstown). These guys are so dominant in that one-inning role they forgot what we used to do. I think they forgot what Lee Smith used to do.”