

'Ron Would Want A Celebration, Not Bitterness'

(Other than family members perhaps, no one knew Ron Santo better than Cubs play-by-play commentator Pat Hughes, who spent 15 seasons with him in the WGN Radio broadcast booth. In advance of Santo's Hall of Fame induction this weekend, Hughes shared his thoughts about the late third baseman with the Chicago Baseball Museum.)

By Pat Hughes

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Of all the Hall of Famers who have ever been at the podium in Cooperstown, N.Y., nobody would have enjoyed it more than Ron Santo. I just know that he would have been beside himself with pride and happiness, and there would have been so many Cubs fans there to help him enjoy that moment.

In terms of numbers, the scene probably would have been something that Cooperstown hadn't seen before. Somebody told me that, when Cal Ripken Jr. was inducted a few years back, between 120,000 and 130,00 people were in attendance. I'm positive Ron would have drawn many more than that. I don't know exactly how many – nobody does – but my feeling is that an attendance record would have been set considering how popular he was as a player and a broadcaster and all the money that he raised for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. That's three different fan bases right there. And of course, there's the enormous number of Cubs fans in general.

(Boy, can you imagine if the Cubs were riding high in first place? Can you imagine how much joy and excitement that would have added to the experience? It wasn't meant to be, but we do have a young team with an exciting new player in Anthony Rizzo, and Ronnie would have loved that kid.)

Ron wouldn't have spent much time to prepare his speech. He had a habit of not writing down anything when he spoke in front of large crowds. He would just get up and talk right from the heart, as he did on the day that his jersey number 10 was retired on Sept. 28, 2003 at Wrigley Field. He didn't have a single piece of note paper with him that day.

The first thing Ron did was thank the guys in the dugout for winning the Central Division championship the day before. Then he thanked the fans. He said, 'This is my Hall of Fame right here,' because he loved Wrigley Field more than anything. He loved Cubs fans. For him to get his uniform number retired maybe was the best day and biggest joy that he had experienced in his whole life.

I think Ron would have tied something about diabetes into his speech. Just because you have diabetes should not slow you down. You can still have a lifetime of activity and achievement. That would have been his message for diabetics, especially the younger



For Pat Hughes, the induction of late third baseman Ron Santo into the Hall of Fame will be an emotional experience this weekend. They teamed on WGN Radio broadcasts in the 1996-2010 seasons.

ones.

Ron would have mentioned Billy Williams, Ernie Banks and Ferguson Jenkins. The Cubs organization would have been thanked profusely, WGN Radio and the Tribune Company as well.

Ron would have talked about the great era in which he played. He did play in a very special time. Truly, the National League of the 1960s is the Golden Era compared to any league in any other decade in Major League Baseball ever. Of course, he shined in that era.

The cool thing about Ron's induction as a player is that it places the focus on his career. There is an entire generation of young people who remember him only as the broadcaster who had fun and got emotional and cheered for the Cubs and loved when they won and agonized when they lost. The induction ceremony will educate many fans about his playing career, which obviously was very special.

Yeah, emotionally, I think people would have been weeping in the audience. No question about it. And Ronnie himself might have been weeping also.

At the same time, for those of us who know how much he would have enjoyed it, that Ron is no longer here will be difficult to get out of our minds. The honor probably is 10 years overdue.

I know that, right after the announcement came out last December, any number of people said, 'I'm happy, but it's too late.' Or 'Why didn't this happen five years ago so he could have enjoyed it?' I can't answer that question. I don't know the reason. I will not bring it up myself, but if I'm asked about it, I'll might make a reference to it to be honest with you.

So I expect there to be some ambivalence this weekend. Some people will be upset that Ron isn't there to enjoy it. In fact, I'm sure that's why some people won't be there at all.

Now that Ron has been afforded the greatest honor that any ballplayer can achieve, his absence isn't something that I'll dwell on, though. I can't help but think that Ron would have wanted it that way. He wouldn't want bitterness. He would want people to be smile, to savor his memory, to have a beer or two or a glass of wine and make a big party out of the weekend. Celebration is the word that comes to mind. I'll approach it that way, and I hope all others will, too.

As someone who spent so much time with Ron over the years, it will be an emotional time for me as well. I know how much it meant to him. I know how hard he took those two or three times when he got close but fell short in the Hall of Fame election. I know how much that hurt him.

Literally, almost every single day, there would be somebody who came in the booth whether it be a fan or another broadcaster from wherever and said, 'Ronnie, you should be in the Hall of Fame.' Or a former player would say, 'Ronnie, I've voted for you for years, and I don't know what the heck is going on.' He heard that every single day.

Because Ron absolutely loved the game of baseball and was crazy about the Cubs, he was able to cope with the disappointments. I can't help but think of the look on his face

when a Cubs player made a great play or hit a game-winning home run. It was the look of joy, a combination of a prideful senior citizen and a giddy 10-year-old kid.

That's the look that Ron would have had in Cooperstown this weekend, and it's one that I'll think about often at a very special time for many of us.