

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Smith writes off failed HOF bid in final year of eligibility on writers' ballot

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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The announcement hardly came as a shock to Lee Arthur Smith when the Chicago Baseball Museum called the former Cubs closer with bad news a few minutes after the Jan. 18 Hall of Fame vote was announced.

“I think I’m just going to write it off,” Smith said of falling short of induction in his 15th and final year of eligibility on the Baseball Writers Association of America balloting.

Now Smith is remanded to whatever latter-day name the old Veterans Committee takes. And that panel only meets every three years to consider the late 20th century period group in which Smith pitched.

“Maybe if the veterans thing comes around, but I don’t think I’ll be paying too much attention,” said a philosophical Smith.

One man’s meat always is another man’s poison in Hall of Fame voting. Tim Lincecum, with two distinguished tenures as a White Sox player and coach, is going in with Jeff Bagwell and Ivan Rodriguez. Meanwhile, Smith has to take his proverbial glove and ball, and go home even after ranking as the all-time saves leader not long ago.

Smith, working for many years as the Giants’ roving minor-league pitching instructor, has long stopped rationalizing the voting process in which he started off relatively strong, then lost ground through recent years. He finished 11th with 151 votes, a 34.2 percent tally. The 75 percent threshold is the toughest vote of any major institution in the country short of the unanimous conviction tally required for juries.

“I have no idea, man,” he said.



**Lee Smith knew he'd fall short
in Hall of Fame voting.**

Joining the club of the snubbed

At least Smith knows he's in the distinguished company of the snubbed. His career starting in 1980 on a 98-loss Cubs team, Big Lee realizes he benefited from the work of Players Association godfather Marvin Miller. Free agency began just four years previously. Bud Selig will enter the Hall of Fame this summer with Raines and Co., but Miller hasn't gotten a serious sniff at induction as probably one of the top five game changers in baseball history.

"Only guy I know who voted for Marvin was Andre Dawson," Smith said. "The guys who didn't vote for him probably played before free agency."

At least the recognition for closers is advancing, even though Smith said a prejudice exists that voters "don't think it's a hard job... people don't think a reliever pitches a team into the World Series."

Trevor Hoffman, who passed up Smith to rank as the career saves leader (601) until Mariano Rivera (652) subsequently overtook him, finished with 74 percent of the vote, 2 percentage points behind Rodriguez. Every candidate who has come within 1 percentage point of induction eventually has gotten into Cooperstown, either by the BBWAA vote or the Veterans Committee.

"What does Hoffman have that I don't have?" Smith asked. Well, for one, lifetime stats. And publicity. After sometimes napping mid-game in the clubhouse, Smith sauntered into games slowly, while Hoffman made a grand entrance to "Hells Bells" on the PA system in San Diego. Hoffman also played in an era where closers were a more dominant part of baseball, their Hall of Fame entrees moving slower than their primo status in winning each game.

Hoffman also caught the wave of specialization and reduced workloads for closers. He generally came in just for the ninth. But especially in the first part of his 478-save career, with the Cubs, Smith toiled two innings, and once in awhile even more. In his first two years as a full-time closer, Smith logged more than 100 innings.

He saved at least 31 games four consecutive years (1984-87) with the Cubs. His peak, though, came with 133 saves for non-contending Cardinals teams over a three-year span (1991-93). Smith always loved his St. Louis years, where there was not as much controversy over his efforts as in Chicago.

If there was a Hall of Shame for Cubs trades, Smith would rank in the Top Five. The late Cubs development guru Gordon Goldsberry recalled how new GM Jim Frey rushed Smith, whom Frey disliked, out of town in "half an hour" at the 1987 winter meetings for likely the first two players the Red Sox offered – pitchers Calvin Schiraldi and Al Nipper.

Why should just writers vote?

One other factor about the voting process bothers Smith. The writers have had a chokehold on the Hall of Fame inductions since they began in 1939 in one of those hide-bound baseball traditions that never changes. More recently, the BBWAA had pruned off the rolls writers who have not covered baseball in many years, thus missing out on personal observation of some candidates. Even so, other qualified voters like broadcasters have been consistently ignored. So have the most logical voters of them all.

“The voters now never put on a glove, never threw a ball,” Smith said.

He cannot disagree with the induction of Raines, a worthy opponent with the old Montreal Expos. “Rock” was the only player in big league history with at least 100 triples, 150 home runs and 600 stolen bases. He also was the only player with four different seasons of at least 50 extra-base hits and 70 steals. Rickey Henderson, move over -- Raines was the sole big leaguer to total 70 or more stolen bases in six consecutive seasons (1981-86). He finished with 808 steals and 2,605 hits.

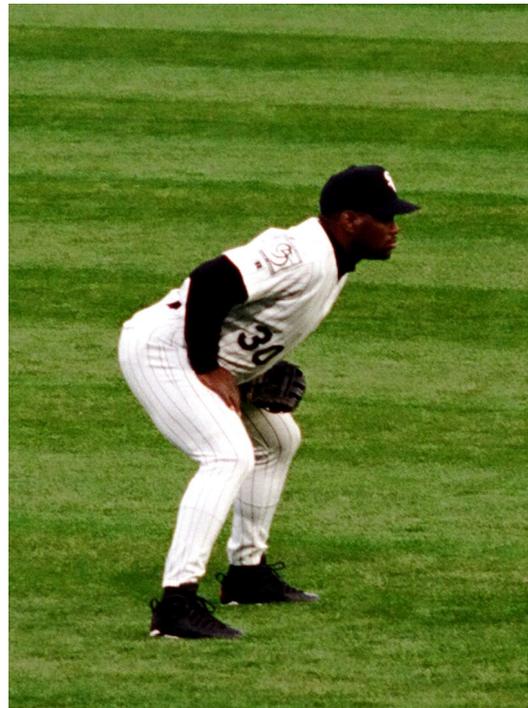
He played with the Sox for five seasons (1991-95) when his wheels were slowing, but his bat was still productive. In 115 games, he slugged 16 homers and batted .306 with a .401 on-base percentage for the 1993 AL West division title winners. In his Sox tenure, Raines batted .283 with 143 steals.

Like his teammates, Raines was robbed of a shot at the World Series by the 1994 strike. But he finally got a ring as Sox first-base coach on the 2005 champions.

“Rock was one of my favorite teammates ever,” said fellow Hall of Famer Frank Thomas. “He made the game fun night-to-night and was a great leader in the clubhouse. His humor and hustle always brought the team closer. I’m so glad this has finally happened for one of my favorite people ever.”

Guys like Raines made the game a challenge for Smith at the plate and on the basepaths. Their duels evoke positive memories, even when receiving the news he did on a winter afternoon.

“Baseball was very good for me,” said Big Lee.



After inching closer in the vote recently, Tim Raines finally got over the top to enter Cooperstown. Photo credit [clare and ben](#).