



Hall of Fame speechwriting takes passion, detail work, discipline

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How do you write a Hall of Fame speech?

Hundreds of speeches have been given since Cooperstown welcomed its first enshrinees in 1939. But not often is the process of crafting the acceptance into baseball immortality revealed from start to finish.

And rarely is the first-time speech-writer so organized as Tom Shaer.

The longtime veteran Chicago radio and TV sportscaster is now running his own media consulting firm. A friend and supporter of the Chicago Baseball Museum, Shaer became a rookie Hall of Fame speechwriter crafting the remarks of Dennis McNamara, grand-nephew of Chicagoan Hank O'Day, enshrined Sunday for his work as a National League umpire, manager (Cubs in 1914 included) and 19th Century pitcher.



Tom Shaer (left) and Paul Ladewski, executive director of the Chicago Baseball Museum.

O'Day was most famous for calling “Merkle’s Boner” play at the Polo Grounds that led to the Cubs’ last World Series triumph in 1908. But his accomplishments went far and wide beyond that seminal moment.

“I’ve been to Cooperstown for about 10 inductions,” Shaer said. “Most recently I was there for Andre Dawson (2010). Also Billy Williams and Nellie Fox. What I decided was to remember what I think would make a good Hall of Fame speech. It’s the most important Hall of Fame, the longest-lasting one, the most prestigious one and the toughest one to get into.”

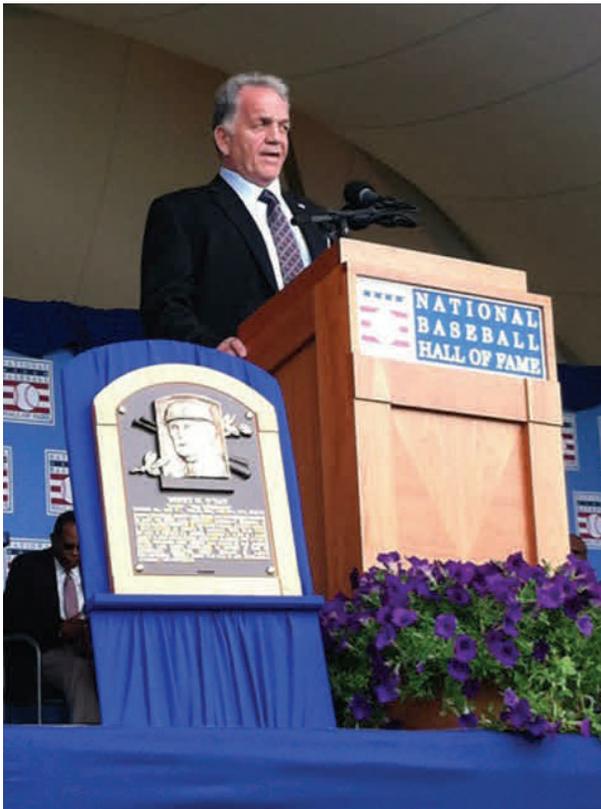
Less was more for speech length in Shaer’s battle plan.

“In 1983 Jack Brickhouse (with whom Shaer worked at WGN-Radio that year) gave a speech under five minutes,” he said. “It was extremely well-received – it ran about three minutes, 40 seconds. I’ve known players who gave speeches that ran 35 minutes that were not well-received. Phil Rizzuto’s was so long and rambling and unscripted and unstructured that at least four Hall of famers walked out during the speech. They didn’t want to sit there anymore.

“Too long is not good. I resolved right away we would not go long. The Hall of Fame would like you to go five minutes. Right there I knew they really want seven minutes. Eight minutes, nobody’s going to kill you. What they really want to avoid is 12 to 14 minutes, which is out of control.”

No Carson-style monologues wanted

Johnny Carson-wannabes are not welcome at Cooperstown. Speech-givers literally need to stick to the script.



Dennis McNamara delivers his Hall of Fame acceptance speech on behalf of Hank O'Day.

The Hall of Fame assisted in being accurate with (O'Day's and McNamara's) genealogy. We wanted to talk about baseball, how Hank related to baseball.

“These have to be scripted speeches,” Shaer said. “You can’t wing it and ad-lib it. Mike Ditka ad-libbed his (football) Hall of Fame speech, and gave a great speech. But he completely forgot to mention his family. It wasn’t his intention, it was an oversight. When you ad-lib, sometimes you forget things. Sometimes you say things that waste time. I knew we wanted to not abuse the time allowed.”

Shaer took a number of factors into account before he hit the keyboard.

“Who Hank O'Day was and what did he accomplish?” he said of the first requirement. “Tie into his personal background – he was a Chicago guy through and through. He was born here before the Civil War on the West Side of Chicago when it was farm country.

“Dennis McNamara -- we should know why he’s there delivering the speech, what similarities and identities he has with Hank O'Day as his grand-nephew.

“The final thing I asked Dennis is what’s important to you? Together we had a good collaboration. I don’t think it’s difficult, I really don’t.”

The speech was basically done in a day.

Two drafts result in a speech

“I took 2½ hours to write the first draft,” Shaer said. “I then took about a half hour to make changes and produce a second draft. Then from that point on, on four separate occasions I spent 10 minutes each time changing a sentence here and there – I call that polishing.

“When I had Dennis read it to me out loud, I made a number of tweaks. Certain phrases I wrote just didn’t come off his tongue naturally. I was careful to write for Dennis. He delivered as we planned -- a very dignified speech with some great substance. It had a number of personal messages. The feedback we got was fantastic.”

Here is the final script of the speech, with Shaer’s direction for McNamara’s pauses for effect and bold-faced phrases for verbal emphasis:

Why is some guy named Dennis McNamara standing here? Because I am the oldest living descendant of my grand-uncle, Hank O’Day, **who is now inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame!!** I’d really like to belt out a verse of “*Take Me Out To The Ballgame*”....but I’ll behave myself.

(PAUSE)

I’ve wondered, “What does all this mean?” Well, it means everyone is **recognized** at some point. You may not know it, but recognition **does** come—perhaps quietly in your everyday life or, yes, sometimes with a great honor, which Hank O’Day is receiving posthumously, 86 years after he finished his long career as an umpire. **Persevere**, for you, too, **are** –or will be- **recognized**.

(PAUSE)

The O’Day story is a tale of Chicago, where Hank lived his entire life. He was born in 1859 to deaf parents, who were Irish immigrants on the west side, which was farm country in those years before the Civil War. His extended family is still in Chicagoland, a real baseball **hotbed**.

It has two teams with rich histories and has been home to fabulous players like: Banks, Williams, Jenkins, Appling, Fox, Aparacio, Fisk, “Double-Duty” and my late friend, Ron Santo. It was my pleasure to introduce Ronnie to his wife, Vickie, who gave that beautiful speech here last year.

(PAUSE HERE)

Chicago had Comiskey Park, still has Wrigley Field, fireworks at U-S Cellular Field and the planned Chicago Baseball Museum, with the Jerome Holtzman library. We have a future Hall-of-Famer in White Sox Chairman Jerry Reinsdorf and a Cubs Chairman, Tom Ricketts, who is very committed.

(PAUSE)

We love our teams, even if it took the Sox 88 years to win another World Series and the Cubs are....er....uh....now 105 years and counting. Hey, as Hall of Fame broadcaster Jack Brickhouse said: **anybody can have a bad century**.

(PAUSE)

So, who was this Hank O'Day? I bet few know he was not only a Hall of Fame umpire, but also an accomplished Major League pitcher, starting in 1884. Yes that's **1884**. He also managed the Cincinnati Reds and Chicago Cubs—he was the first native Chicagoan to skipper the Cubs. He is the **ONLY** man in the history of the National League to play, manage and umpire in full seasons—all during an outstanding **five decades** in the game.

Uncle Hank first threw his wicked fastball on the Chicago sandlots and his seven seasons of playing included a spectacular performance for the 1889 World's Championship. In that series, he had an ERA of 1.17 in 23 innings pitched. Not bad. He earned two victories. Not bad. The following season, he won 22 games before his arm gave out. Not bad.

But my grand-uncle made his biggest impact as an umpire. In 1895, he was working as a Cook County Clerk –we Irish knew how to get those county jobs, even back then.

(PAUSE)

Baseball's brass remembered Hank O'Day had filled in as an umpire years earlier, and they called him to replace an injured ump. It was a much different time. Foul balls were not strikes, ground-rule doubles were home runs and -- can you believe this: **only one umpire covered the entire field**. The owners refused to hire a second man. Finally, by the time Uncle Hank retired in 1927, two umpires worked each game. Wow, what big spenders those owners were.

(PAUSE)

Hank O'Day umpired **a then-record 10 World Series**, including the first “modern” Fall Classic, in 1903. Umpires had too often been victims of violence, and Uncle Hank was instrumental in taking the profession out of the dark ages. He got all umps the respect and security they **needed**.

(PAUSE)

The man was known for his remarkable skill of accurately calling balls and strikes...and for his **unrelenting honesty and integrity**. Back then, home teams won a surprising 61% of the time. The lone umpire may have been intimidated by the local crowd. But not Hank O'Day. Cleveland's manager remarked: “I hate to see O'Day in my home park, but I'm delighted when he's in charge and we're the road team.” **Honesty and integrity** led Uncle Hank to the Hall of Fame.

(PAUSE)

Hank O'Day's famous moment came when he voided an apparent Giants victory over the Cubs in the infamous "Merkle game" in 1908. That suspended game kept the Cubs alive in the pennant race and they would win their last World Series. Though he was from **Chicago**, no one questioned O'Day. They knew his *only* motive was to get the call right.

In fact, what wasn't known was that he'd umpired a game with the **SAME** situation weeks earlier and was told by the National League that a key baserunning rule **had to be enforced** in the future, which he did in the "Merkle" game. His decision has stood the test of time for over a century.

(PAUSE)

Honesty and integrity make any effort great, regardless of the profession. I was a Chicago Police officer for 29 years and I've always been mindful of judges, police officers and civic officials who put their reputations on the line each day, with unpopular calls to enforce the rules and laws that govern society.

(PAUSE)

Uncle Hank died seven years before I was born, but he was an almost mythic figure in our family and his example guided me as a policeman. It helped future descendants, too. We count among us those who also work in advertising, business, education and dining & entertainment.

My daughter, Katie, has been with Harry Caray's Restaurant Group for 19 years. **Harry Caray**—how appropriate.

(PAUSE)

The lesson of Hank O'Day is: **Do your best with honesty and integrity**. It is a lesson known to these Hall of Famers behind me...and one that might be on the minds of some players **not elected**. It will bring to this wonderful destination **next** year players who **did** value honesty and integrity, such as our stars from Chicago: Frank Thomas and Greg Maddux. Hopefully, Minnie Minoso will join them via the Veterans Committee.

(PAUSE)

Hank O'Day's grand-nephew, my brother Rick, is here today...as are Hank's **great**-grand nieces: my daughters Katie, Jodi, Traci and Christi. And, of course, my wife, Carol. I thank them all for living the ideal begun by our distant relative.

(PAUSE)

Thanks to the dedicated women and men of the Hall of Fame for everything they've done since the voting was announced, and to longtime Chicago sports-caster Tom Shaer for all his help. Most of all, the descendants of Uncle Hank are grateful **to the greatest game...baseball** and to its leadership, under Commissioner Selig, for taking MLB to new heights of popularity, integrity and overall health.

(PAUSE)

In closing, I urge everyone to **visit** the National Baseball of Fame and Museum because this is the game’s magnificent destination for professionals **and fans**. **Here are the “best of the best”** and I shall always be humbled by the fact that my grand-uncle, **Hank O’Day**, is among them.

This is a place of **tradition**. Baseball **respects tradition**. Hank O’Day and his family have held that tradition **true**. Thank you so very much

Shaer knew McNamara would be stretching his speaking abilities.

“Dennis does not normally play in this arena -- national public speechmaking,” he said. “Dennis is a retired Chicago cop who worked 29 years. Now he works security for movies and TV shows, and guards celebrities when come to Chicago. He was tied into the Bears of the 1960s. He had a walk-on tryout with the Bears, at training camp.

“I thought he performed very well for a guy into a new experience. Other Hall of Famers really liked his speech. They really thought he addressed those elements. (Dennis) Eckersley was really interested in O’Day and McNamara, and how a regular person comes to do a speech.”

Shaer grew up as a Red Sox fan in western Massachusetts in the 1960s and 1970s, then covered the team in Fenway Park before he moved to Chicago to work at WGN. He continued his lifelong baseball education through the speech.

“O’Day umpired his last game 86 years ago,” Shaer said. “He died 78 years ago. It was a thrill, because I didn’t know a lot about him. It was a thrill to be able to educate the world about him. All the world knows he umpired the Merkle game. There’s so much more to Hank O’Day than that. He was a star player late in his pitching career. To actually help make it a good event is almost surreal in a very positive way.”

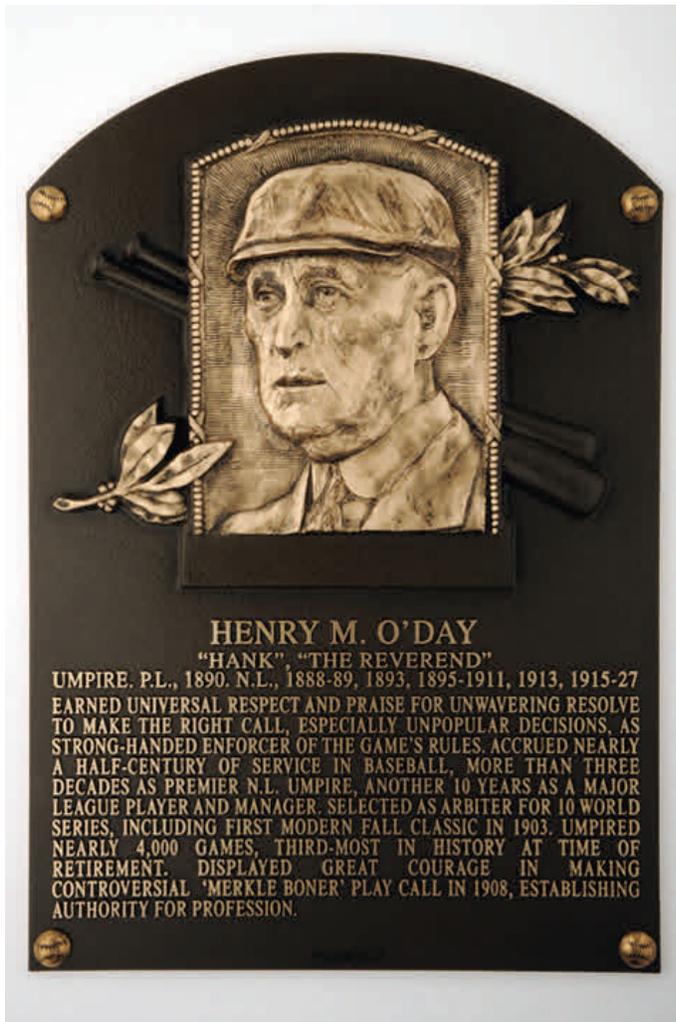


Dennis McNamara (right) discusses Hank O’Day with other Hall of Fame inductee family members at Cooperstown.

One on one chat with Koufax a highlight

In addition to watching McNamara impress the crowd with his speech, Shaer experienced a highlight any baseball fan in his right mind would enjoy – a conversation with Sandy Koufax.

“Dennis talked to Sandy,” he said. He told Sandy I wrote the speech, and invited me to join the conversation. Dennis had to go do something, and here I am talking to Sandy. He was nice. We talked about how important the Hall of Fame was. This year, they wanted to be especially clear in their support for the Hall of Fame. He told me he liked the speech, he told me why he liked the speech, which made me feel great.



Hank O'Day's Hall of Fame plaque in Cooperstown.

said. “They come because they’re fans of the player being inducted or the team he represents. I thought there’d be more regular baseball fans, but there were not.”

Despite the lack of the usual buzz, Shaer praised Hall of Fame officials Jane Forbes Clark, Jeff Idelson, Brad Horn and Whitney Selover for their usual event management.

“They did a fabulous job,” he said. “They really take care of these people. It’s a well-oiled machine.”

“(Koufax) appeared very comfortable where he was. He was very comfortable and gracious to everyone. He posed for photos with some families of new Hall of Famers. I once interviewed Sandy when I was 15 at a golf tourney in Connecticut. He was very, very nice then. I had asked him what he did after leaving NBC (as a ‘Game of the Week’ baseball announcer).”

Another highlight for Shaer was taking a photo with Rachel Robinson, Jackie Robinson’s widow.

“That was important to me,” he said. “She was treated like baseball royalty the whole weekend.”

Two things marred the weekend. Rain postponed part of the ceremonies for an hour. And attendance was low by modern Hall of Fame standards. The lack of any new player inductees voted in by the Baseball Writers Association of American cut the crowd count.

“They don’t come to Cooperstown for Induction Weekend,” Shaer