

Thursday, December 27, 2007

Debate: Is Goose Gossage a Hall of Famer?

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Last year Rich "Goose" Gossage fell a mere 21 votes short of election to the Hall of Fame. Now in his ninth year on the ballot, Gossage is considered the candidate most likely to be enshrined in 2008. Will the former relief pitcher finally close the deal or will he have to wait another year? Goose can count on at least one extra vote -- from new Gossage convert Sean McAdam. He and fellow ESPN.com correspondent Phil Rogers discuss Gossage's Hall candidacy, and McAdam explains why he hasn't voted for the Goose until now.



Goose Gossage led the American League in saves three times.

FROM: Phil Rogers

TO: Sean McAdam

SUBJECT: Goose Gossage -- Hall of Famer or not?

Hey there, Sean. Happy holidays to you. I know you're a true pro, but as a New Englander, is it possible that you held '78 against my guy Goose Gossage? I'm glad you are coming around, joining me in the "Set the Goose Loose" Hall of Fame campaign of 2007. But really, how has the most dominating relief pitcher I've ever seen -- well, until Eric Gagne in 2003, and that's a whole different argument, isn't it? -- fallen short of 75 percent approval among our BBWAA brethren for his first eight trips on the ballot? I think a lot of us have just been slow to recognize relief pitchers. I'm hoping Bruce Sutter's election two years ago serves as a springboard to get Gossage in this time around. I'll admit that I'm an easy voter. I believe in giving guys the benefit of the doubt whenever possible (although Gary Carter got elected without my vote and I'm still on the fence with Jim Rice). I was probably one of the few voters who put three relievers on their ballots in previous years when I checked Sutter, Gossage and Lee Smith. I'm down to one this year, as Smith has been passed by Trevor Hoffman for the all-time save lead and my vote for Lee Arthur was based on his being the leader. Sorry, Lee. Gossage, like Sutter, isn't a guy you can judge by his numbers -- but if you were going to, how about his 10 wins and 27 saves in '78, when the Yankees made up that huge gap on the Red Sox? That was the best year a reliever ever had, at least until Tony La Russa and Dave Duncan reinvented Dennis Eckersley. I've got to think that Goose could have been saving 50 or 60 games with those Yankee teams if he'd been used the way modern closers are used, an inning at a time. He was coming into the game in the seventh or eighth inning and staying out there until it was over. That's a man's job and in his era, Goose was The Man. So, Sean, why do you think he's such a tough call for many voters?

FROM: Sean McAdam

TO: Phil Rogers

SUBJECT: RE: Goose Gossage -- Hall of Famer or not?

Seasons Greetings, Phil,

First, let me assure you that I've long ago exorcised '78 from my memory bank. Gossage was unhittable that October afternoon, though it should be remembered that one of his strikeouts was recorded against the hapless Bob Bailey and thus should be stricken from the record books. But I digress. I've come around on Gossage. My apologies for being late to the party. For a number of seasons, I resisted voting for Gossage for -- as the commissioner likes to say -- a myriad of reasons. I remembered Gossage's hanging on at the end of his distinguished 22-year career and having ordinary -- at best -- seasons with the Giants, Yankees (Part II), Rangers, A's and Mariners. In those last five seasons combined, he had a grand total of eight saves. Not exactly the stuff of legends, right? By then, of course, relievers were routinely posting 40-save seasons -- Gossage never had more than 33 in a single year -- and his numbers began to look pretty ordinary by comparison. He never won a Cy Young Award or an MVP -- like Dennis Eckersley, Willie Hernandez and Rollie Fingers each did. Not long after the likes of Bobby Thigpen saved 57 one season, the significance of the save became devalued and I think, like many of my BBWAA brethren, I began to view even elite closers differently. Of course, Gossage in his prime didn't have inflated save totals. You're right, Phil: Goose routinely pitched multiple innings and six times in his career topped 90 innings out of the bullpen. But there's been such a backlash against relievers and their place in the game's modern history that I think some of us -- insert uncomfortable throat-clearing sound here -- threw the closers out with the bathwater. I plead guilty -- and throw myself at the mercy of the court.

FROM: Phil Rogers

TO: Sean McAdam

SUBJECT: RE: Goose Gossage -- Hall of Famer or not?

Sean, that's a fair point you make about the end of his career and it's an interesting question for Hall of Fame voting in general. A lot of guys just hang on too long and clearly Goose was one of those. He did not have much left in the tank his last five or six years but kept getting jobs -- imagine how long he could have pitched if he were left-handed! And I think it did hurt him with voters. If you watched him in the end, it did become hard to appreciate how good he was when he at the top of his game.

Another guy like that, for me, was Carlton Fisk. He didn't have much left but kept pushing himself out there. In the end, with Fisk, it probably worked out because he went out with the record for games caught. And I'm a big believer in the value of career numbers for the Hall -- so you'd think the longer you'd play, the better. But a guy like Gossage can challenge that theory. If you remember Goose of '78, how about the Goose of '79? When Cliff Johnson broke Gossage's thumb in that infamous shower fight, it helped finish off the Yankees' chance to win four pennants in a row? Do you think the

Yanks could have won if Gossage hadn't gotten hurt? Another question for you, Sean, since now it seems I'm preaching to the choir. I'm thinking Goose will make it this year. You agree?

FROM: Sean McAdam

TO: Phil Rogers

SUBJECT: RE: Goose Gossage -- Hall of Famer or not?

Phil, I wouldn't presume to know why other voters -- like me -- have resisted voting for Gossage over the years, but if I were to guess, I do think the tail end of his career was a factor. As you noted, merely hanging on can serve to obscure what had been accomplished earlier. Longevity is a tricky thing -- in and of itself, it's not always proof of a great career. On the subject of relievers, there's Jesse Orosco, who pitched into his mid-40s and set a record for career appearances. Still, I'm sure you'll agree that he's no one's idea of a Hall of Famer. Of course, Gossage is different. Starting in the mid-1970s for about a decade, he was as accomplished and intimidating as any relief pitcher in the game. If voters focus on that -- and not his hanging-on years -- then I believe he will finally gain entrance. It's funny, Phil, for all the acclaim and attention closers get, historically, the few closers who get to Cooperstown have (mostly) had to wait a number of years before their election. Dennis Eckersley is the exception, rather than the rule. Think of it: Sutter got just 23.9 percent of the votes in his first year on the ballot (1994) and had to wait another dozen years before finally getting in. Hoyt Wilhelm didn't get in until his eighth season of eligibility. And now Gossage.

FROM: Phil Rogers

TO: Sean McAdam

SUBJECT: RE: Goose Gossage -- Hall of Famer or not?

Sean, I wish I could explain the trends and patterns of BBWAA Hall of Fame voting. But like the operation of the internal combustion engine, it escapes me. You mention Eck as a reliever, but he was such a different animal with the split career between starting and relieving -- the only guy with 100-plus saves and complete games -- that I don't know if he truly signals an appreciation for closers. We may have to wait until Mariano Rivera or Trevor Hoffman for that -- at least I would hope those guys would immediately be deemed worthy.

I did a little homework on Gossage's recent surge in voting and it really makes me think he will get elected this time around. I'll never understand why a guy becomes a better candidate as he ages, but in the last three elections the support for Goose has grown from 206 of 506 -- only 36.6 percent and 174 votes short of the 75 percent standard -- to 388 of 545. That's 71.2 percent and only 21 votes short of election. He's received at least 51 more votes in each of the last three elections, so I can't see why that trend should stop with him on the threshold of the Hall, particularly in a year when there are no automatic first-timers on the ballot. Tim Lincecum, as you know, is probably the best choice and I bet he doesn't get 50 percent of the vote. Assuming the Goose is set loose in Cooperstown next July, I've got only two more words for you: About time.



Goose Gossage helped pitch the Padres to the World Series in 1984.

FROM: Sean McAdam

TO: Phil Rogers

SUBJECT: RE: Goose Gossage -- Hall of Famer or not?

I suppose, Phil, one of the reasons that people's vote totals change is because of instances exactly like this one: A voter re-examines someone and reserves the right to change his/her mind. The stats don't change, but sometimes, your perspective does. I'm not afraid to admit I erred in not voting for Gossage earlier, and I have made amends.