

Thursday, December 27, 2007

Tanner backing Gossage

By Jerry Crasnick
ESPN.com

The timing of the Baseball Hall of Fame announcements isn't exactly a boon to holiday cheer. For candidates on the brink, the Christmas season is a chaotic blend of shopping, gorging, overdosing on bowl games and dreading the awkward silence from a phone that never rings.

Validation day is near for Goose Gossage, now that Dennis Eckersley and Bruce Sutter have joined the club -- and the Hall electorate seems ready to accept another closer from the Paleolithic era. Gossage received 71.2 percent of the vote last year -- only 21 votes short of the 75 percent required for induction -- and he's poised to make the cut when the results of this year's ballot are announced Jan. 8.

Chuck Tanner, 25th on baseball's managerial win list with 1,352 victories, recently joined the Pittsburgh Pirates as a senior adviser to general manager Neal Huntington. When he watches the Hall of Fame results roll in each January, his life flashes before his eyes.

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Chuck Tanner on Goose Gossage

Tanner was disappointed to see one of his personal favorites, Jim Kaat, fall off the ballot in 2003 after 15 appearances without a call. He's also perplexed that Tommy John, who pitched for him in Chicago in the early 1970s and won 288 games, is making his 14th appearance on the ballot and has yet to sniff selection.

So Gossage represent Tanner's best chance of attending an induction ceremony with a personal stake in the festivities. He's happy to give him his blessing and his personal endorsement.

"I know in my heart what he did," Tanner said. "I know how competitive he was and how he made me successful. He made me a good manager. I didn't make him. I just kind of steered and guided him a little here and there."

It's no stretch to say that Tanner played a pivotal role in Gooses' career. While managing the White Sox in the early 1970s, Tanner had the inspiration to convert two young fastballers, Gossage and Terry Forster, from starting roles to the back end of the bullpen.

Tanner might have been ahead of his time, but his decision was rooted in both long-term vision and short-term expediency. He knew it would be a shock to a hitter's system to see Gossage grunting and snorting in 98 mph increments after seven innings of watching Wilbur Wood's knuckler and Tom Bradley's curve.

Gossage, freed from the constraints of pacing himself, harnessed his fury and went on to pitch 22 seasons in the majors. As Hall of Fame manager Dick Williams once said, "If there's a batter who likes to face him, he's gotta have rocks in his head."

Gossage amassed 310 saves at a time when they rarely came cheaply. During one three-year stretch of relief with the White Sox, Pirates and Yankees, Gossage averaged 26 saves and 136 innings a season.

ESPN's Jayson Stark, who ranked Gossage as the most underrated closer in baseball history in his book, combed through the box scores and found that Gossage made a whopping 17 appearances of 10 outs or more in his first season as a closer.

"You'll hear managers' today say, 'This is my set-up guy,' or, 'He's my closer,'" Tanner said. "Goose was my set-up guy and my closer. I made him do it all."

That's one reason why Tanner, when asked where Gossage ranks on the list of baseball's greatest closers, places him ahead of Trevor Hoffman, Eckersley, Rollie Fingers, Sutter, Mariano Rivera and Lee Smith -- in short, the elite of the elite.

"Listen, they're all great," Tanner said. "Don't get me wrong. But I'm prejudiced. When Gossage would come in there, boy, he had that Fu Manchu and that tenacity. His attitude was, 'I'm coming after you, buddy. Let's see what you can do.' He should've been in the Hall of Fame on the first round. If they don't take him this time, there shouldn't be a Hall of Fame."

Gossage, had hoped to make his Hall of Fame speech in Cooperstown with his mother, Sue, in attendance. But she died last year at age 92, and he now seems more at peace with the fickle nature of the selection process.

For what it's worth, the former Pirates have one feisty septuagenarian still fighting on their behalf. Chuck Tanner, their surrogate baseball dad, is anxiously awaiting the results of this year's balloting.

It's been a trying stretch for Tanner, one of the game's most upbeat and beloved figures. In August 2006, Tanner's wife of 56 years, Barbara, died after a series of medical setbacks. In the spring, Tanner was hospitalized for a bleeding ulcer that required surgery.

As he reflects upon the past and contemplates the future, nothing thrills him more than the prospect of a sunny July day in Cooperstown, and Goose Gossage standing on a podium giving his induction speeches.

"Make the story nice, so he gets in," Tanner said.

Jerry Crasnick covers baseball for ESPN.com. His book "License To Deal" was published by Rodale.