

Blyleven gets novel Hall of Fame push

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As domain names go, it sounds more Sesame Street than Cooperstown. Yet go to www.bertbelongs.com, click on the Web site and you'll find baseball, not Bert & Ernie. Bert Blyleven, and a sophisticated, computerized case for his election to the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

It's all there, the feature elements including: Building the Perfect Pitcher. Create your own pitchers duel . . . and see how Bert Blyleven stacks up against other all-time greats. Best Curveball. How to Help. Almost everything, it seems, but a rubber duckie.

"You can have more fun on a Web site," said Bill Hillsman, a highly successful Minneapolis advertising executive, lifelong baseball fan and the brains behind bertbelongs.com. "From our political work and commercial work, we know if you're trying to put a lot of information in one place, the best way [to do so] is online."

Besides, if Hillsman's advertising campaign helped pro wrestler Jesse "The Body" Ventura get elected as governor of Minnesota, perhaps he can help Blyleven — an eight-year Cooperstown also-ran despite 287 career victories and 3,701 strikeouts — to finally body-slam the Hall's electorate.

"This is just an attempt to let people know how good a pitcher Bert was," Hillsman said. It's also the latest high-tech, 21st-century entry in the Cooperstown sweepstakes, an annual December rite once ballots are mailed to voters and the pitches begin for some candidates. Yet hardly all.

"I had no control over this," said Blyleven, who pitched primarily for Minnesota and four other teams from 1970-92 and is now a Twins' broadcaster. When Hillsman proposed the Web site last summer, Blyleven thanked him and replied, "Nice of you to do that. If you can get my numbers out there, have at it."

And what does its namesake think of bertbelongs.com now? "It's awesome," said Blyleven. He particularly likes "the comparisons to the guys that are in the Hall. The numbers, how I rank in innings pitched, shutouts, strikeouts, complete games, wins. Being an analyst with the Twins, I deal with numbers every day. Numbers have always been a big part of baseball."

Not all numbers guarantee admission to Cooperstown, however. Not even some impressive stats trumpeted in several promotional postcards mailed to voters, each featuring an action photo of Blyleven and a phrase like, "Only 13 pitchers have pitched over 4,970 innings. The other 12 are in the Hall of Fame."

Not all Cooperstown candidates are comfortable with even the appearance of self-promotion, either. Certainly not Dale Murphy, who played for the Braves from 1976-90, was a two-time NL MVP, hit 398 homers but hasn't come close to election in his seven years of eligibility.

"It's not that self-promotion is a bad thing," Murphy said, chuckling over the phone from his home in Utah. "Everybody needs to support their families and themselves. It's the context — in this instance, the Hall of Fame. I've always been a little uncomfortable with it.

"Guys have their own individual approaches," Murphy said. "I'd tend to be a little more careful. I don't know what voters would think if I was calling them personally, or writing them, and asking them to consider me. It can get to the point where you're self-promoting so much, you can get ignored."

In 1976, his 14th and next-to-last year on the ballot, pitcher Bob Lemon was finally elected to the Hall of Fame. Perhaps it was just coincidence that many voters that year — all members of the Baseball Writers Association of America — received a small package in the mail. Inside was a lemon, and a note asking them to vote for Lemon.

Which begs the question: how do you solicit support for Jim Rice? No, not with a package of Uncle Ben's. The Red Sox, for whom Rice played his entire career from 1974-89, recently e-mailed prominent Hall voters a detailed four-page PDF entitled, "Why Jim Rice is Worthy of Hall of Fame Induction." Now in his 12th year on the ballot, Rice — who led the AL with 382 homers and 1,451 RBI's during his 16-year career — fell 80 votes short of election last year.

Of course, bertbelongs.com is even more extensive. "It's really well done," said Marty Appel, a noted baseball historian and author from New York who doesn't have a Hall of Fame vote. "It gave me an increased appreciation of Blyleven."

It also gave him pause. "One of the last things I saw was his year-by-year stats," Appel said. "I saw he had only one 20-win season. I went, 'Hmmm.' It can be a double-edged sword."

Yet perhaps it can enhance the candidacy of Blyleven, who last year got just 40.9 percent of the 75 percent necessary for election. Also, Orel Hershiser and Albert

Belle, the top newcomers on this year's ballot, aren't expected to come close to being elected. Asked why he hasn't been elected yet, Blyleven replied, "Of course, it's, 'Oh, you didn't win 300 games.' I think there are only 21, 22 pitchers who won 300. A lot of guys who are in didn't win 300. And it's also that I never won a Cy Young [award]. As my wife says, 'Cy Young didn't win a Cy Young.' "

"Is it too much?" Blyleven said of the Web site and campaign. "I don't think it's my [place] to persuade some writers to vote for me. But if [Hillsman] can persuade some, I think it's a good thing."

And perhaps, eventually, a great thing. "It'd be an honor to be in the Hall of Fame," Blyleven said. "Do I think I deserve to be? Why yes, I do. Is that being cocky? I think it's being factual." He paused briefly. "Do you have a vote?"

"There's some guys I'm kind of wondering why they're not in," Murphy said. "I think Bert's pretty close to 300 [wins]. He has good numbers."

"I have some good numbers, too, but I'm not exactly on pins and needles waiting, like I'm right on the edge," Murphy said, laughing. Last year, he got just 54 votes, 10.5 percent. "So, when is the voting? It's in early January? February 1st?"

As always, ballots are due Dec. 31. Results are announced a week later.