

McCaffery: Blyleven's absence remains a wrong

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In a sport of measurable distances and accomplishments, certain baseball numbers linger like cheery tunes, easily recited by memory, never to fade. Seven-fifty-five. Seven-fourteen. Fifty-six. Four-oh-six. Then there is this one: Three-thousand, seven hundred and one. For the last eight years, it has glowed from the literature attached to the Hall of Fame ballot, but seems to have made the electors cover their eyes. Some have been willing to sing along to the legend that should be Rik Aalbert Blyleven. Just not enough.

Technically, there is nothing that leaves Bert Blyleven's 3,701 career strikeouts above the rest, for there have been four more prolific strike-three pitchers. But their names are Nolan Ryan, Roger Clemens, Randy Johnson and Steve Carlton. Ever heard of 'em?

No, it is not easy to chant, "He's No. 5, he's No. 5, he's No. 5!" and expect a chorus to chime right in. But consider who are Nos. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 -- Tom Seaver, Don Sutton, Gaylord Perry, Walter Johnson, Phil Niekro, Fergie Jenkins, Bob Gibson, Greg Maddux and Jim Bunning. Each is in the Hall of Fame, save Maddux, who will join them five years and one second after his final pitch kisses the outside corner. So why not Blyleven, who has been rejected in the last eight elections?

That would be up to the individual voters to justify and, well, voters have been known to ignore Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Hank Aaron, Willie Mays and Larry Bowa. So this Baseball Writers Association of ours has struck out a few times itself.

Blyleven pitched 22 seasons and won only 287 games, which could dull his candidacy, with some believing that his strikeout total was the just litter left by someone who'd hung on the corner for a while. But before punishing Blyleven for his longevity, the voters should consider this: He was a Rookie of the Year in 1970, and the Comeback Player of the Year in 1989 -- proof that he was of award-winning efficiency from front to back of that lengthy career.

No, Blyleven never won a Cy Young Award, which may have helped. But he was on two world championship teams -- Pittsburgh in 1979 and Minnesota in 1987. And championships always make for forceful tiebreakers.

Within the next 11 days, a fresh batch of Hall of Fame ballots will have been filled

out and, well, the man once classically nicknamed by Chris Berman as Bert "Be Home" Blyleven just well may stumble in too late again. He finished seventh in the voting last year, behind Wade Boggs and Ryne Sandberg, who were elected, but also behind Bruce Sutter, Jim Rice, Rich Gossage and Andre Dawson, who were rejected. Since Sutter, Rice, Gossage and Dawson remain on the ballot, that suggests heavy traffic for Blyleven.

This much, though, is certain: Blyleven has one vote, on a ballot looking like this:

- Pete Rose: The commissioners, plural, may hope Rose goes away, but they can always count on his name showing up on one ballot, in red ink, as a write-in vote. He may have broken a rule after his playing days, but no one ever questioned the legitimacy of 4,256 hits, the most in the history of the game. Until Rose is the Hall of Fame, they ought to turn the joint into a comedy cabaret.

The rest, in alphabetical order:

- Albert Belle: Nine consecutive 100-plus-RBI seasons. Sold.

- Bert Blyleven: While there should be no PIN number to open the Hall's front door, how can the fifth-ranked player in such a meaningful statistic as strikeouts be made to wait so long in the vestibule?

- Andre Dawson: If 438 home runs and eight Gold Gloves don't say Hall of Fame, then neither does Babe Ruth's creaky locker.

- Steve Garvey: Some belong in the Hall of Fame because of their statistics. Garvey belongs in because he was a dominating winner and one of the most consistent players of his generation, even if his 2,599 hits and 272 home runs fall short of the unofficial (and nonsensical, if used as handcuffs) 3,000-400 qualifying marks.

- Rich Gossage: The more the "closer" is accepted as just as legitimate a position as shortstop or catcher, the more the achievements of the pioneers of the position gain perspective. Not only did Gossage turn out 22 seasons worth of lights, but he was 124-107, a dazzling record for a late-inning specialist.

- Don Mattingly: He hit .352, he hit .343, he hit .324, he hit .327, he won a batting title, he had five triple-figure RBI seasons and he won nine Gold Gloves. Hey, it's time those Yankees get a little respect in the Hall of Fame balloting.

- Jim Rice: In his time, he was a dominating long ball threat. and still hit .300 or better seven times.

- Lee Smith: No one saved more games. He leads the list. Something complicated there?

- Bruce Sutter: Not only was he successful, but his perfection of the split-fingered fastball made a lasting impact on all pitchers. That's a Cooperstown-worthy combo.

The rest? Well, if Will Clark, Jack Morris, Dave Parker or Dale Murphy enter the Hall, they would not be out of place. There just was not any particularly convincing reason to include them this time, on this ballot, which has been stuffed with the maximum number of names.

But there was that one number, the one that still sings. So sing it out loud: Three-thousand, seven hundred, and one -- one more vote for R.A. Blyleven, one that may help strike out a Hall of Fame wrong.

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