

Blyleven, others deserve call to Hall

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Already the folks in Cooperstown are worried about 2007. That's when Cal Ripken, Tony Gwynn and Mark McGwire become eligible for the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

You thought Woodstock was a hassle. Are there enough rooms in central New York for all the worshippers? Buffalo? Albany? Canada?

And what sort of demons will leap out of Pandora's Box when McGwire's name emerges, considering the pharmaceutical questions?

There is not quite as much concern about 2006.

Bruce Sutter finished third on the '05 ballot, falling 43 votes short of commemoration. This is the 13th year the split-fingered specialist has been up for election. If he doesn't make it by 2008 - his 15th year of eligibility - he falls off.

Jim Rice was fourth, Goose Gossage fifth, Andre Dawson sixth and Bert Blyleven seventh.

Rice is in his 12th year of eligibility, Gossage his seventh, Dawson his fifth and Blyleven his ninth.

Unless some members of the Baseball Writers Association of America experience a change of heart or head, it's very possible that no one will make it this summer.

Strange, because it isn't particularly difficult to make the case that all five should. Those who get stubborn and protective about the Hall of Fame have two arguments.

One is that players are only Hall of Famers if they were "dominant." They would have to be the best, for at least a short time, at their positions. The other, more pretentious way to put it is: "If you can write the history of baseball without including X, he shouldn't get in."

The corollary is that "compilers" should not get consideration. "Compilers" are players who were among the best, but never *the* best, and diligently amassed the numbers just by hanging around.

The problem is that you can write the history of baseball without many players who are Hall of Famers, and you cannot write it without several people who are not.

As much as we all might fondly remember Paul Molitor, Red Schoendienst and Heinie Manush, they did not change the game, yet they deserve to be in Cooperstown.

Meanwhile, Marvin Miller and Charles O. Finley turned baseball inside out, and they still await election by the Veterans' Committee. Kirk Gibson, Don Larsen and Johnny Vander Meer are pillars of baseball's history and yet not Hall of Famers.

The anti-compilers obviously feel they are standing guard against mediocrity. But the truth is that baseball doesn't just give out strikeouts and home runs and RBIs like gold stars. Longevity should be rewarded.

As Hall of Famer Joe Morgan said this summer, "I know that if I still *could* play, I still *would* play. You can't penalize guys who are able to play that long."

Sutter? He was absolutely dominant, and his mastery of the split-finger would earn him his own chapter. With the Cubs and Cardinals Sutter verged on unhittability, and in the 1980s he often spent three innings saving games. He had 300 saves in 12 years. When he left St. Louis, Manager Whitey Herzog said, "I just got 40 games dumber."

Gossage? Ask anybody who tried to beat the Yankees in the ninth. Gossage had 310 saves. To bar Sutter and Gossage is to plead ignorance to the significance of the modern closer. But then, what about Lee Smith? He had 478 saves and a 3.01 ERA, better than Gossage's.

Rice? He wound up with a .298 average and 382 homers, and a career slugging percentage of .503. Seventeen players have taken a .290 average and 350 homers to the ballot, and the other 16 are in. In 1978 Rice topped 400 total bases, the first player to do that since Joe DiMaggio in 1937, and is the only major-leaguer to lead the majors in triples, homers and RBIs for a season. That's dominance, yet Rice is forgotten.

Dawson? The gatekeepers have to explain this one. The Hawk was both a Rookie of the Year and an MVP and slammed 438 homers with 318 steals. And 2,774 hits? Good grief.

Then there's Blyleven.

The Dutchman is slowly rising in the poll, from 23.5 percent of the vote in 2001 to 40.5 percent last year. But you still need 75 percent.

Bill Hillsman, the advertising guerilla fighter who got Paul Wellstone and Jesse Ventura elected in Minnesota and is now prepping Kinky Friedman to become governor of Texas, has built a BertBelongs.com web site that might illuminate any baseball writers who care to check it.

You already should know that Blyleven is fifth all-time in strikeouts. He also has 287 victories. That's 79 more than Don Drysdale. He also had more postseason victories than Big D, more shutouts than Bob Gibson, more complete games than Tom Seaver.

Everyone who is eligible for the Hall, and who has won more games than Blyleven, is in Cooperstown except for Bobby Matthews. Every eligible pitcher in the top 20 in strikeouts is in the Hall except for Blyleven and David Cone - and Blyleven had more strikeouts than Seaver, Fergie Jenkins, Don Sutton, Walter Johnson and Gaylord Perry.

What hurts Blyleven is a relatively low winning percentage (.536) and a relatively high ERA (3.31). He also had just one 20-victory season. But he was 5-1 in the playoffs and pitched prominently for the world champion '79 Pirates and '87 Twins.

Maybe you can write baseball's history without Bert Blyleven. Before you do, wait for the next pitcher who throws 242 complete games and tops 267 innings in nine seasons.

You'll be waiting longer than Blyleven, who, along with Sutter, Gossage, Rice and Dawson, has waited long enough.