

Next year may be now for Hall wannabes

By Mel Antonen, USA TODAY
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There is no surefire candidate to make baseball's Hall of Fame next month, which could be good news for borderline players such as Andre Dawson, Bert Blyleven, Bruce Sutter and Jim Rice. Each has fallen short, sometimes tantalizingly so, in earning election to baseball's shrine. Thanks to a paucity of high-profile candidates, that could change next month.



Bruce Sutter (clockwise from top left), Andre Dawson, Bert Blyleven and Jim Rice wait for Cooperstown's call.

AP photos

More than 500 members of the Baseball Writers Association of America spend December researching candidates. Ballots are due Dec. 31, and the new members are announced Jan. 10.

A voter can select up to 10 members on the ballot, but sometimes writers vote for just three or four players, says Jack O'Connell, the BBWAA secretary-treasurer. "Someone who has never voted for a particular player might look at his stuff a little more. The ballot is not stacked. There's a larger window."

Sutter, a closer, was on 66.7% of the ballots last season, falling 43 votes short of getting the 75% needed. Rice was at 59.5%, Dawson 52.3% and Blyleven 40.9%.

Next December, the ballot gets crowded: those eligible for the first time will include Cal Ripken Jr., Mark McGwire and Tony Gwynn.

Bert belongs.com pushes Blyleven, saying he has more wins than such Hall of Famers as Bob Gibson, Don Drysdale and Jim Palmer.

Dawson hired a public relations firm to line up December interviews. Boston Red Sox historian Dick Bresciani sent voters a package of statistics that point out Rice is only one of 17 players to appear on the ballot with at least a .290 career average and 350-plus home runs. Of those 17, only Rice and Dick Allen are not in the Hall of Fame.

Dawson, who works in the Florida Marlins' front office, says too much emphasis is placed on the automatic numbers: "If you fall a little short, it doesn't mean you didn't perform."

He said the voters should consider what a player did and not hold him out for what he didn't do.

But Dawson doesn't worry. "If 50% of the voters say you are a Hall of Famer, that says a lot."

Dawson: Voters split on 'Hawk' views

Outfielder Andre Dawson is the classic case of borderline Hall of Famer. He's on the ballot for the fifth time, and voters are trying to decide if he was feared or just a consistent hitter.

Dawson, nicknamed Hawk, had an impressive blend of speed and power in his 21 seasons, starting in 1976, when he was named the National League's Rookie of the Year while playing for the Montreal Expos.

He had 438 home runs, 1,591 RBI, 314 steals, a .279 average and an NL MVP award with the 1987 Chicago Cubs. He won eight Gold Gloves for his defense and made eight All-Star teams. In three other seasons, he finished in the top 10 in the NL MVP voting.

And Dawson had 2,774 hits.

The downside for Dawson, who works in the Florida Marlins' front office, is that he never had a 200-hit season, only led the league in home runs and RBI once and had only four 100-RBI seasons.

Dave van Dyck, a voter from the *Chicago Tribune*, says he has always been a supporter of Dawson: "I saw him in his 1987 MVP season, and he was a marvelous player. He was overlooked a little bit."

Dave Hyde of the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale says he'll vote for Dawson, but not Boston Red Sox slugger Jim Rice, who, like Dawson, has fallen short of induction in past years.

"They're two players with comparable offensive skills — Dawson has more homers, Rice has a better average — but Dawson's speed and defense" swing his vote, Hyde said. "Eight Gold Gloves playing right field. (Dawson) was a complete ballplayer."

Voter Terry Pluto, of the *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*, doesn't believe that Dawson is a Hall of Famer: "Good, but not great. His numbers are good, but they don't scream out."

Says Richard Justice of the *Houston Chronicle*: "I haven't convinced myself that the numbers are there."

Blyleven: Strong case, in totality

Pitcher Bert Blyleven, on the ballot for the ninth time, had one of the nastiest curveballs of his time, but his Hall of Fame chances depend on which statistics grab voters: For his career, he's a Hall of Famer. Year-to-year presents a different view.

Blyleven, now a Minnesota Twins broadcaster, won 287 games with 242 complete games. His 3,701 strikeouts rank fifth all-time and his 60 shutouts rank ninth. He was on two World Series winners and had a 2.37 World Series ERA.

But he had only one 20-win season, never finished higher than fourth in Cy Young Award balloting and was only a two-time All-Star. His year-to-year statistics include a 17-17 record twice as well as 17-16, 13-16, 15-12 and 16-15.

He did pitch on several mediocre teams, particularly in five seasons with the Cleveland Indians. If 300 wins is an automatic milestone, should voters hold Blyleven responsible for playing on weak teams?

"Blyleven had 287 wins — 13 more and there wouldn't be any discussion," says voter Bud Geracie of the *San Jose Mercury News*. "That seems pretty ridiculous, not to mention a severe penalty for a 4% shortfall."

But Justice says Blyleven wasn't dominant in his 22 seasons. Justice prefers 254-game winner Jack Morris: "I have looked at (Blyleven's) numbers over and over, and haven't voted for him. He wasn't ever the dominant pitcher. Morris was a great clutch pitcher, a postseason winner. I don't understand why he's not in."

Rice: Voters take second look

By today's standards, Jim Rice's 382 career home runs look puny. But as Rice gets Hall of Fame consideration for the 12th time, voters are struggling with his overall ability and whether he was one of the game's best hitters when he played from 1974-1989.

Rice, an eight-time All-Star, led American League hitters with 382 home runs and 1,451 RBI during his 16 seasons with the Boston Red Sox. He was the AL MVP in 1978 and finished in the top five in voting in five other seasons.

He led the league in home runs three times — his highest total, 46, was in 1978 — and he was the RBI champion twice. He had seven .300 seasons and four 200-plus hit seasons, including leading the AL in triples in 1978.

The downside is that Rice is seen as a power-hitting outfielder, more like a DH, who took advantage of Fenway Park's Green Monster.

Not true, says voter Bob Finnigan of *The Seattle Times*. He says Rice was not a good defensive player, but a pure hitter: "Fenway is reputedly built for right-handed power, but Rice's stroke was so sweet and quick he was able to wait longer on pitches. And his true power was to right center, a poke in Fenway. When he was on, he hit the ball that way."

Voter Hyde says Rice wasn't a complete enough player for Cooperstown.

Voter Don Burke of *The (Newark, N.J.) Star-Ledger* says he hasn't voted for Rice in the past, but will this year in light of the steroids issue: "I've taken a second look at his numbers and see him for what he was — the dominant offensive player of his era and one who did it naturally."

Sutter: 300-save man epitomizes relief debate

Bruce Sutter had 300 saves during his 12-year career in the 1970s and 1980s, but voters aren't sure if that's enough to immortalize a closer.

Voters feel they need more time to evaluate closers. Sutter's saves rank 19th on the all-time list. If he gets elected, does that open the door for such closers as Doug Jones (303 saves), Tom Henke (311) and Jose Mesa (319)? And, how should voters judge closers that rack up 400-plus saves?

Closers are judged more on dominance than statistics because save totals are difficult to judge. And postseason performances seem to help closers. Hall of

Famer Rollie Fingers had 341 saves and a 1.35 World Series ERA. Hall of Famer Dennis Eckersley had 390 career saves and 15 postseason saves.

All-time leader Lee Smith, who saved 478 games, is not in the Hall of Fame.

Voter Dan Le Batard, of *The Miami Herald*, thinks Sutter is overrated. "All relievers are overrated," Le Batard said. "I think any good pitcher could (close). There are very few relievers I'd put in the Hall."

Sutter, on the ballot for the 13th time after finishing 43 votes short last year, gets credit for revolutionizing the split-finger fastball. He led the National League in saves five times — his highest total was 45 with the St. Louis Cardinals in 1984 when he won the NL Cy Young Award — and finished in the top 10 in NL MVP voting in five seasons.

The argument against Sutter, who pitched for the Cardinals, Chicago Cubs and Atlanta Braves, centers on how long he was a dominant closer.

"Sutter is legitimate, and I vote for him," says voter Hal McCoy of the *Dayton (Ohio) Daily News*.

Sean McAdam, of the *Providence (R.I.) Journal*, will not vote for Sutter because his dominance lasted seven or eight years and he had "minimal postseason impact," pitching in just one postseason.