

Winning isn't everything

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San Bernardino County Sun
March 28, 2005*

The most overrated pitching statistic in baseball is the one that is most often used as a benchmark for greatness: wins.

Wins for a starting pitcher is treated nearly the same as home runs for a hitter. And yet, these stats are compiled in completely different ways.

A home run is a singular accomplishment. No one helped the hitter hit the ball over the wall (except perhaps the trainer with the syringe).

However, there are many factors that are out of a pitcher's control that could keep him from earning a win.

The offense may not score any runs (or just one or two). The defense can make errors allowing unearned runs to score. The bullpen can blow a lead.

There are many instances where pitchers are awarded wins and they didn't deserve it. The offense scores a ton of runs when the pitcher gives up a bunch of runs. The offense rallies the next half-inning after the pitcher blows a lead.

Relievers are often given wins they don't deserve when they blow a lead for another pitcher and the offense rallies in the next half inning.

There was even a case in the last couple years where a reliever was given a win without throwing a pitch in the game. He came in with two outs late in a tied game. He picked off a runner at first to end the inning. The offense rallied in the next inning and the pitcher was replaced by the closer to save the game.

Despite all this, the win is still used as the primary yardstick to judge a pitcher's performance, both in a season and a career.

A pitcher who has 20 wins in a season is judged to have had a great season. On the other hand, having 20 losses on your resume in a season is considered so bad that numerous pitchers over the last 20 years have been benched to avoid their 20th loss until the Tigers' Mike Maroth collected 20 for the abysmal Tigers of 2003.

In the National League, Randy Johnson lost a sixth Cy Young Award to Roger Clemens despite Johnson having a better ERA, more strikeouts, more innings pitched, and fewer walks and hits allowed per nine innings. The only reason Clemens won the Cy Young is because he had a better record.

Clemens finished 18-4 for an Astros team that had a great offense, a solid bullpen and won the National League wild card. Johnson finished 16-14 for a Diamondbacks team that had a

horrible offense, a shaky bullpen without an established closer and finished dead last in a weak NL West.

So, because of the idolization of wins, Clemens now has seven Cy Youngs and Johnson still has five. (It's hard to cry for Johnson now that he is with the Yankees. If he doesn't win the Cy Young Award this season, he has no one to blame but himself).

Earning 300 wins is also considered a standard for greatness, considering every retired pitcher with 300 career wins is in the Hall of Fame. However, because some pitchers haven't reached this milestone, they aren't considered Hall worthy despite otherwise excellent career stats.

One of the worst examples of this is former Angel Bert Blyleven. The right-hander with perhaps the best curveball ever is fifth on the all-time strikeouts list with 3,701. Blyleven is the only pitcher in the top 14 on that list who is not in the Hall of Fame or is not considered a first-ballot Hall of Famer.

Blyleven trails only Nolan Ryan (5714), Clemens (4317), Randy Johnson (4161) and Steve Carlton (4136). Blyleven is ahead of such notable Hall of Famers as Tom Seaver (3640), Walter Johnson (3509) and Bob Gibson (3117).

Blyleven is also ninth on the all-time shutouts list with 60. Blyleven is the only pitcher in the top 20 on that list not in the Hall of Fame. Clemens has the most shutouts for active pitchers with 46.

Blyleven is also 13th on the all-time innings pitched list, with all 12 pitchers ahead of him in the Hall of Fame. He pitched for 22 seasons and was one of the top pitchers on two World Series champions, the 1979 Pittsburgh Pirates and the 1987 Minnesota Twins.

Blyleven also was excellent in the postseason, going 4-1 with a 2.47 ERA.

Blyleven's biggest problem was being on some very poor Twins and Cleveland Indians teams in the mid-1970s and the early 80s. He routinely had very little run support, which is probably why he is third all-time with 15 1-0 wins.

Despite all this, the pitcher with 287 career wins still only received 41 percent of the vote in the last Hall of Fame election (75 percent is needed to be inducted).

If he had only been credited with 13 more wins over a 22-year career, he would be in the Hall of Fame already.