

TIM  
SULLIVAN



## What is it with the Hall voters, duck, duck, duck, Goose?

UNION-TRIBUNE

January 4, 2008

Thirteen years since his last professional pitch secured his final big-league save, Rich Gossage's immortality may finally be imminent.

Based on historic voting trends and blessed with an otherwise unremarkable ballot, the Goose is about due for his gander at the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The Class of 2008 is scheduled to be revealed Tuesday, and Gossage figures to be its valedictorian. He is, after all, the leading holdover candidate, the recipient of more than 71 percent of last year's vote, and this in spite of the considerable shadows cast by Cal Ripken Jr. and Tony Gwynn.

Besides, after eight failed attempts, isn't there some numerological symmetry in a relief pitcher coming through in the ninth?

Which is not to suggest, however, that any of this makes the slightest bit of sense.

If Gossage commanded only 33 percent of the votes when he first appeared on the Cooperstown ballot in 2000, what has he done since then to account for his sharply escalating support within the Baseball Writers' Association of America?

The Goose hasn't been in a ballgame since Aug. 8, 1994. He hasn't cured cancer or brought peace to the Middle East. Granted, neither has he poisoned the world with his hamburgers – a charge Gossage once leveled at former Padres owner Joan Kroc – but a man only gets so much credit for eschewing genocide.

What Gossage *has* done is to complain bitterly about being snubbed; to argue that the role of the relief pitcher has changed more than voters recognize; to ratchet up his rhetoric so that it evokes the high heat for which he was famous.

"I don't know if I ever will make it," Gossage told the *New York Post* after the 2006 election. "You know what, I never hear from these guys who don't vote for me. But I'll take on any writer, anywhere, on any show, and I will bury him."

Gossage said he was insulted that Dennis Eckersley reached Cooperstown ahead of him, and "don't even compare me with (Trevor) Hoffman or (Mariano) Rivera." Having saved 310 games in an era when closers customarily pitched two or three innings, Gossage openly resented the praise heaped on more rationed relievers.

He might have been more diplomatic, but he certainly had grounds to nurse a grudge. At his peak, from 1977 through 1985, Gossage struck out 793 hitters in 833 innings for the Pirates, Yankees and Padres with a composite earned-run average of 2.10.

He defined dominance.

Jack O'Connell, secretary-treasurer of the BBWAA, cornered Gossage last year at a New York dinner and urged patience.

"I understood his eagerness and his disappointment," O'Connell said yesterday, "but (told him) that attacking the electorate could be counterproductive and he shouldn't ruin what I perceived to be a steady climb in the voting."

The climb O'Connell cited is one of the more peculiar patterns in sports, the annual migration of Hall of Fame voters from unconvinced to advocacy. It is a source of considerable frustration among aspiring Hall of Famers and a source of embarrassment for many voters.

Each year, the BBWAA electorate meets Einstein's definition of insanity by reviewing the same data only to arrive at markedly different results.

Case in point: Billy Williams.

Williams was a six-time All-Star with the Chicago Cubs and the National League's 1972 batting champion, but his first appearance on the Hall of Fame ballot produced only a 23 percent approval rating. Five years later, without a single revision in his statistics, Williams was elected with an 85 percent landslide.

When that many minds change that quickly without benefit of new information, you have to wonder what they could have been thinking. You have to wonder, in fact, whether they were thinking at all.

For decades, the extensive backlog of Hall of Fame candidates forced many worthies to wait. No player was elected on the first ballot between the original 1936 election and 1962.

Yet while some voters continue to hold first-ballot candidates to a higher standard, the old backlog has evaporated and the new ballots are no longer loaded with obvious enshrines. Though reasonable arguments have been advanced this year on behalf of Gossage, Jim Rice, Andre Dawson, Jack Morris and Bert Blyleven, none of them qualify as no-brainers.

All five of these candidates, however, received at least 95 more votes last year than in their first appearance on the ballot. Gossage, Rice and Blyleven have more than doubled their original vote percentages.

This suggests that the voters are easily swayed and prone to stampede; that while they presume to uphold standards, they generally blow with the prevailing breeze.

The power of persuasion can be profoundly positive and agonizingly slow, as the film "Amazing Grace" amply demonstrates. Yet it seems self-evident that a player who has been retired for five years does not improve when he's been retired for six years.

If a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, as Emerson tells us, what then of foolish inconsistency?