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On Baseball

A Reliever From the Old School Awaits His Hall of Fame Day

By MURRAY CHASS

The Yankees' new relief pitcher lost three of his first four games, and people, including catcher Thurman Munson, were wondering what was going on. That pitcher, Rich Gossage, thereafter to be known primarily as Goose, gave up game-losing hits to Richie Zisk (home run) and Don Money (double), then made errors on successive sacrifice bunts.

"Thurman would come to the mound," Gossage recalled, "and he would say, 'How are you going to lose this one?' The first time he asked me that I couldn't believe he was asking me. But that was Thurman."

Losing games was not Gossage, though those games were not the last he would lose. But in a 22-year career, Gossage, a hard-throwing right-hander, was the type of relief pitcher that has become extinct. Pitchers today, especially relief pitchers, are pampered. Gossage was not pampered.

Today's closers are asked to pitch one inning, the ninth. Seldom, for example, does Mariano Rivera, considered the best closer, pitch more than one inning. Last season he relieved in 67 games and pitched 71 1/3 innings. As the Yankees' closer, he pitched an 11-year high of 80 2/3 innings in 2001.

In Gossage's first season with the Yankees, 1978, he relieved in 63 games and pitched 134 1/3 innings. In those first four appearances, he pitched three innings once and three and two-thirds innings twice.

One time he relieved at the start of the seventh and pitched the final seven innings of a 13-inning game. Later in the season he pitched seven innings again in a 17-inning game. Sixteen times he pitched three innings or longer, 35 times in his 63 games two or longer.

"I take exception to Mariano being called the best reliever ever," a still proud Gossage said in a telephone interview Saturday. "But do what we did and we'll be able to compare apples to apples. I don't take anything away from Mariano; he's great. But what these guys do today is easy compared to what we did. It takes three guys to do what I did."

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If voting baseball writers get it right, Gossage will receive the ultimate reward for doing what he did. When results of this year's Hall of Fame voting are announced Tuesday, Gossage is expected to be anointed a Hall of Famer.

A year ago he was named on 388 of the 545 ballots, giving him 71.2 percent, which was 21 votes short of the 75 percent he needed for election. Historically, when a player comes that close and the next year's ballot has no obvious first-timers, he has been elected. Furthermore, no one with as high a percentage as Gossage had last year has failed to be elected subsequently.

"We're keeping our fingers crossed," said the 56-year-old Gossage, who has been on the ballot nine times. "I'd be lying to say there hasn't been disappointment, but it's out of my control."

Gossage said that in past years his frustration was fueled by his desire to be elected while his mother was alive.

"The only urgency was my mom," he said. "She used to say, 'If you go in, I hope you go in while I'm still alive.' She didn't make it. She passed away about a year ago September. That was kind of why I got frustrated because I knew she didn't have much longer to be here. I would have liked to have her around when I went in."

Relievers have had a difficult time making the Hall. Voters seem to discount their work, especially the number of saves they gain. Hoyt Wilhelm, Rollie Fingers, Dennis Eckersley and Bruce Sutter are the only relievers in the Hall, and Eckersley was a starter for the first 12 years of his career.

But when we see closer after closer fail to get the last three outs with the lead intact, it attests to the difficulty and the importance of the job. In Gossage's time it was only part of the job.

"There were a lot of times we pitched when we were behind a run," Gossage said, "and we were brought in to get out of a jam and then had to keep pitching, and keep the game in check so it didn't turn into a blowout."

In addition, he said, there was the type of innings he often pitched. "I couldn't allow a guy to put the ball in play," he said. "I had to strike them out. There were a lot of grueling, pressure-filled innings."

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The workload is what stands out in his mind, Gossage said.

“It was grueling, the way we were used,” he said. “We were abused. Nobody worried about our arms falling off. I didn’t. Today’s pitchers are babied. I don’t agree with pitch counts. I never have. I don’t need a pitch count to tell me if a guy is tired. They’re babied too much. They don’t build up any endurance.”

Pitchers are like racehorses, Gossage said. “If you train a horse to race half a block, that’s all he’s going to be able to run.”

That wisdom has somehow escaped today’s baseball hierarchies as they search in vain for capable pitchers.

The Yankees signed Gossage as a free agent in 1977, even though Sparky Lyle, their No. 1 reliever, had won the Cy Young Award that year. At the news conference announcing his signing, Gossage gave the most honest answer I have probably ever heard from a player.

Asked why he signed with the Yankees, Gossage said, “Because my agent told me to.”