

Put Dick Allen in Hall of Fame

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The Baseball Hall of Fame is conducting its annual induction ceremonies this weekend, a perfect time to consider the career of Dick Allen, whose career statistics warrant a bronze plaque at Cooperstown. That he has yet to be inducted is one of the greatest travesties in the institution's erratic voting process.

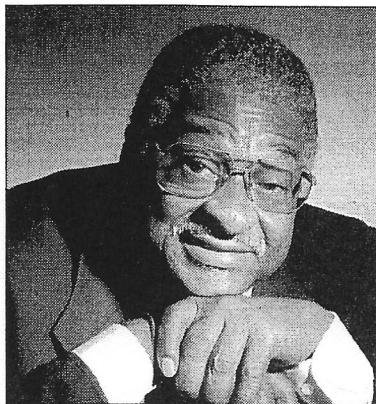
Allen, who starred for the Philadelphia Phillies and Chicago White Sox between 1964 and 1976, became eligible for induction in 1982. But never did the Baseball Writers' Association of America give him more than 18.9 percent of the vote during his 15 years on the ballot. Instead, Allen's candidacy was tainted by the scathing opinions of writers like Bill James, who claimed that Allen "manipulated racism as an explosive to blow his teams apart."

After Allen was eliminated from annual consideration by the baseball writers in 1997, I interviewed him and his Phillies teammates to find out why his candidacy had been so strongly dismissed. I discovered another, more poignant side to Allen's story.

In 1963, the Phillies sent their 21-year-old prospect to Little Rock, making him the first black ballplayer in Arkansas history. The season was a nightmare for him. He received threatening phone calls, the windshield of his car was painted with "N—, Go Home" signs, and he could not be served in a restaurant unless accompanied by a white player.

Still Allen managed to do more than survive. The Phillies called him up in September, and he proceeded to hit major-league pitching at a .292 clip. The next season Allen had to deal with the pressure of a summer-long pennant race while learning to play third base.

While most Phillies fans remember 1964 for the team's infamous collapse in the final two weeks of the season, Allen's .318 average, 29 home runs, and 91 RBIs kept



Dick Allen in 2006. Charles Fox / Staff

the team in the chase for most of the year — a performance that earned him the National League's Rookie of the Year Award.

Though Allen hit .300 and averaged 30 homers and 90 RBIs for the next five years, the fans never forgave him for allegedly instigating the trade of Frank Thomas, a popular white veteran, in 1965. They booed Allen every night, threw pennies, bolts, or beer bottles at him whenever he played the outfield, and sent him hate mail. Philadelphia's sportswriters launched their own character assault, painting the beleaguered star as a rebel who expected special treatment.

When his repeated requests for a trade were rejected by Phillies owner Bob Carpenter, Allen, who did not enjoy the luxury of free agency, tried to force a deal by resorting to unexcused absences, arriving late to games and scrawling letters in the dirt around first base. Allen's controversial behavior only reinforced the negative stereotype that the fans and the media had imposed upon him in the first place.

In Philadelphia, Allen was a victim of racism, not a manipulator of it. In fact, he was considered a "great teammate" by those who played with him "in spite of all the discrimination he suffered." Not until he arrived in Chicago in 1972 did he feel accepted. Allen led a talented but young White Sox team into contention. He also single-handedly reversed the financial fortunes of a troubled

franchise, allowing the team to remain in the Windy City.

Allen's hopes to be enshrined in the Hall of Fame were revived in 2014, when he was considered by a special "Golden Era" Veterans Committee, which voted every three years. To be elected, a candidate must appear on 75 percent of the ballots, or secure 12 of the 16 votes cast by committee members. No one was elected that year. Allen received 11 votes, one shy of election.

Allen's supporters accepted the disappointment and prepared for December 2017, when the Golden Era Committee was scheduled to vote again. But last year the Hall restructured the committee into two voting groups: Modern Baseball (1970-1987), which will vote in December of this year, and Golden Days (1950-1969), which won't vote until 2020.

Though Allen's career spanned both eras, his candidacy was pushed back to 2020 because his "best years came with the Phillies in the 1960s," according to Jeff Idelson, the Hall's president. In fact, Allen's achievements were evenly divided between both eras. He was an All-Star for seven seasons (1965-67, '70, '72-74). In addition to his Rookie of the Year Award, he was named the American League's Most Valuable Player in 1972 while in Chicago. During his 15-year major-league career, Allen batted .292, including seven seasons (1964-67, 1972-74) at the .300 mark or higher. He also hit a total of 351 home runs. Of those, 177 came with the Phillies in the 1960s, but the rest were hit in the 1970s and included the only two times he led the league in homers (1972, 1974).

I want to believe that the Hall of Fame is unbiased in considering candidates for baseball immortality. But the changes in the rules, and the fact that the veterans committee has never elected an African American player who was not a Negro Leaguer, suggest it lacks objectivity; especially when considering someone as deserving as Dick Allen.

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