

Schmidt belongs, so does Rose

By WILLIAM KASHATUS

When the Phillies retired Mike Schmidt's number in May 1990, Pete Rose saluted his close friend and former teammate as "the greatest player I ever played with." Having been banned from baseball for allegedly betting on the game, Rose was prohibited from attending the ceremonies.

Instead, his tribute took the form of a video message. "I hope I get to go to Mike's Hall of Fame induction," he added in his taped remarks, "because just to rub elbows with him for five years made my career worthwhile."

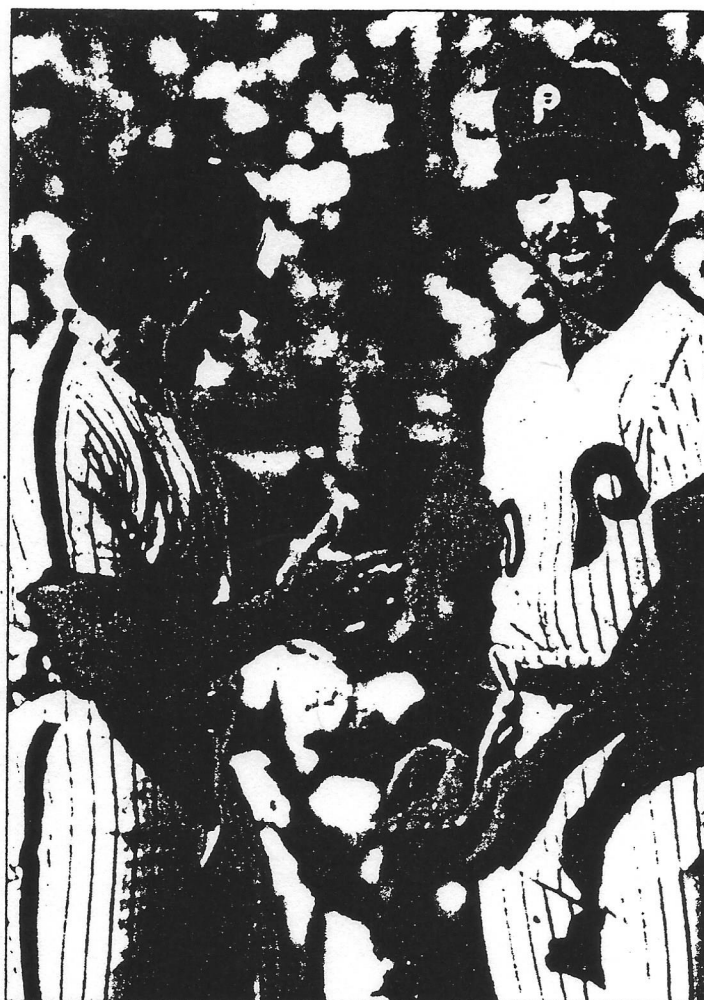
Anyone who attended the ceremonies that evening couldn't help but feel sad about Rose's fall from grace. Here was a man, who for many of us defined the game of baseball with his headfirst slides, blistering line drives, and a competitiveness that burned white-hot game after game for 23 years of a remarkable playing career.

Yet when "Charlie Hustle" agreed to the lifetime ban, he also relinquished his chances for baseball immortality. Unfortunately, attending Schmidt's induction ceremony, just may be the closest Rose will ever get to the Hall of Fame — and it's not entirely his fault.

In his recent book, *The Politics of Glory: How Baseball's Hall of Fame Really Works*, Bill James points out that Rose was banned from baseball "on the basis of rumor, hearsay, slander, gossip and irrelevant information which was fed to the public to make Rose look as bad as possible." James also believes that if Rose ever sues baseball seeking to nullify the agreement he made with the late Commissioner Bart Giamatti, he will win for two reasons.

First, baseball did not negotiate with the former Phillie in good faith. Baseball agreed that there would be no finding that Rose bet on the game if he accepted a lifetime ban. But Giamatti almost immediately announced his belief that Rose did, indeed, bet on the game, thereby nullifying the agreement.

Second, baseball, by taking its case to the press, which subsequently slandered Rose, denied him the opportunity to make a liv-



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ing in his chosen profession. Those facts are much more indisputable than the allegations against Rose.

But even if Rose does take his case to court and is reinstated, his future as a Hall of Fame candidate still rests in the hands of a fickle bunch — the baseball writers. This is the same group who for over two decades praised Rose for being such a wonderful team player and a great interview and then suddenly, in 1989, turned on him.

For generations the writers have posed as the moral stewards of the game, supposedly judging Hall of Fame candidates not only on the basis of their playing ability and contribution to the team or teams on which they played, but also on their integrity, sportsmanship and

character. Strange that they should bestow immortality on Babe Ruth, an incurable womanizer, and Ty Cobb, a racist who was widely suspected of betting on the game, and condemn Rose.

Granted, it wasn't easy to like Rose. Even before his fall from grace, Rose's cockiness and combativeness — which were such invaluable assets on the playing field — made him difficult to admire. But he's also done many wonderful things for the game of baseball, including raising the standard of performance. No wonder Schmidt was able to refer to Rose as "the most likable arrogant person I've ever met," and also credit him "as a big part of my success."

While Rose certainly didn't make

Schmidt a stellar athlete, he *did* guarantee the World Series credentials that set him on his way to Cooperstown. When Rose came to the Phillies in 1979, Schmidt was a bona fide star, but one who had not yet reached the limits of his potential. Nor would his reserved personality and sensitive disposition allow him to enjoy the game.

Rose took Schmidt to a higher level. He convinced him of his exceptional abilities, giving the young power hitter the confidence he needed to become the greatest third baseman ever to play the game.

Rose's sheer presence on the team and the press coverage he attracted took some of the attention and pressure off Schmidt, who became more relaxed and actually began to enjoy his successes.

It is no coincidence that Schmidt won two of his Most Valuable Player Awards and played in two World Series during Rose's brief career in Philadelphia. For these reasons, Schmitty has remained loyal to Rose during the good times as well as the bad.

Since Rose's contributions to the game may never be appropriately honored, Schmidt has willingly shared the spotlight with him in the public ceremonies commemorating his own career. More importantly, with Schmidt's encouragement and support, Rose has been able to turn the page and begin anew, this time as a responsible family man and proprietor of his own business.

If given the opportunity to return to baseball, a reformed Rose just might be able to restore his credibility and help promote a game that is in serious danger of losing the public's trust.

Regardless of what the future holds, Schmidt and Rose remind us of the importance of second chances in life and that true heroism is the courage to explore oneself deeply, to become aware of our shortcomings, and change those aspects of our life that aren't working.

That just may be the saving grace for those of us who truly love the game of baseball and its very human heroes. Perhaps, in time, the baseball writers will feel the same way.

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