

Steroids Aren't the Only Problem Facing the Hall of Fame

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: January 15, 2013 11:20 AM

In 1962, a left-handed hitting 22-year-old Pittsburgh Pirate named Willie Stargell, made his big league debut. That year, in only 34 plate appearances he hit a very respectable .290/.353/.452. Stargell would go on to play 21 seasons for the Pirates becoming one of the best and most beloved players in that franchise's history before being elected to the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.

Stargell was the last of a group of sluggers who began their big league careers between 1951 and 1962 including Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Eddie Matthews, Harmon Killebrew, Henry Aaron, Frank Robinson and Willie McCovey. These players, like Stargell are all in the Hall of Fame, and along with Stargell are among the only 37 players since 1895 to post career OPS+ of 140 or better with over 8,000 plate appearances. Those numbers have been clearly and unambiguously Hall of Fame numbers for most of baseball history. Stargell was the 23rd player to meet that criteria. All 23 of those players are in the Hall of Fame.

Twenty-four years after Stargell made his debut another left-handed Pirates slugger, Barry Bonds, made his debut. By the time Bonds retired he had easily met this threshold of offensive greatness. Interestingly, between Stargell and Bonds only one player, Mike Schmidt, began a career that would meet these numbers. Since 1986 when Bonds made his debut, 13 players have posted numbers that pass the 8000/140 threshold. Two more, Miguel Cabrera and Lance Berkman, are poised to join that group in the next year or two.

Of the 15 players who began their careers in 1986 or later, four have already been on the ballot and have not made it in to the Hall of Fame, while none, other than Chipper Jones and possibly Frank Thomas, are likely to get in easily. The obvious reason for this is the steroid cloud which hangs over the head, rightly or wrongly, of players like Bonds, Alex Rodriguez, Jason Giambi, Manny Ramirez, Jeff Bagwell and Gary Sheffield. Steroids, however, only provide part of the explanation.

Fifteen out of the 39 8000/140 players, including Cabrera and Berkman, began their careers in the last 26 years, while only 24 began their careers between 1890 and 1985. This cannot all be attributed to steroids particularly given how widespread steroid use was and that OPS+ measures offensive production in a comparative context based way. Two other factors need to be considered. The first is simply expansion. With more teams, games and players, more players are going to reach more or less any threshold. Second, the game has changed, and not just due to steroid use. Power and patience, the two attributes which OPS captures so well have more recently begun to be recognized as among the most important skills, so players work on these skills more, get promoted for them more quickly and can continue to play once their other skills

have declined, if they can still hit home runs and walk. This was less true a generation ago, and even less relevant half a century ago.

The combinations of expansion, prioritizing power and patience and, yes steroids, creates problems for how sluggers are compared across eras and, of course, for the Hall of Fame as well, but this problems is exacerbated by a voting system that is unwieldy and flawed. This year no players were elected to the Hall of Fame. The merits of that decision can be debated, but the impact it will have on future elections will be clear. In short, by 2014, there will be so many deserving players on the ballot that it is likely that a player with numbers that were good enough for the Hall of Fame a generation ago, and perhaps no demonstrated link to steroids, will be dropped from the ballot after one or two appearances after next year. Next year there will be five 8000/140 players on the ballot as well as a number of other standouts like Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine and Tim Lincecum.

This problem has been compounded because the last two sluggers to be elected to the Hall of Fame, Jim Rice and Andre Dawson, were clearly several cuts below people like Frank Thomas, Jeff Bagwell and others who despite no documented connection to steroids, are in danger of being overlooked, or overlooked again, in future ballots. Keeping people out of the Hall of Fame because of suspected or real connections to steroids may or may not be wise, but keeping people out because the voting rules have not changed to fully recognize expansion is not.