The Hall of Fame and the Jack Clark Test

Between 1975 and 1992 Jack Clark was a very good player for the San Francisco Giants, St. Louis Cardinals, New York Yankees, San Diego Padres and Boston Red Sox. He was not, however, a Hall of Famer, receiving only 1.5% of the vote in 1998, his only year on the ballot. Clark’s career numbers were very strong hitting .267/.379/.476 for an OPS+ of 137 in 8,230 plate appearances. His best years were 1978, 1982, 1985 and 1987.

Clark plays an interesting role in the Hall of Fame debate not because he should be in, but for the precise opposite reason. When Clark was playing few people thought he was a future Hall of Famer. Some felt that injuries derailed that possibility, but he was generally thought of as a very good player who was a cut below what was needed to get into Cooperstown. This view has not changed since Clark retired.

Therefore, a good test for whether a player should be elected to the Hall of Fame is whether or not he was clearly better than Jack Clark. The data suggests that people who were better hitters than Clark probably should be in the Hall of Fame. There have been 47 players who like Clark posted an OPS+ of 135 or better over 8,000 or more plate appearances. Of those 26 are in the Hall of Fame. Of the remaining 21 all but four other players, Will Clark, Bob Johnson, Sherry Magee and Reggie Smith are either on the ballot, still active or not yet eligible.

The players who have OPS+ of less than 135 and are in the Hall of Fame either played key defensive positions well like Bill Mazeroski or Ozzie Smith, had much longer careers than Clark, like Tony Perez or Al Kaline, have a special circumstance surrounding their career like Monte Irvin or Kirby Puckett or are considered among the weaker Hall of Fame selections like Andre Dawson or Earle Combs. It is a generalization, but only a slight one to say that every player who was clearly a better hitter than the two Clarks, Magee, Johnson and Smith is either in the Hall of Fame or, barring steroid issues, likely to get in, while those who are about as good are either not in the Hall of Fame, in for other reasons or among the weaker and more questionable Hall of Fame selections. Accordingly, it is possible to think of a Jack Clark test with regards to the Hall of Fame. This test would apply only to players whose Hall of Fame candidacy rests on their offensive contributions and consist of asking simply "Was that player clearly better Jack Clark?"

The first player to whom this test might apply is Dale Murphy, the longtime Atlanta Braves star whose career overlapped almost entirely with Clark’s. Murphy is now facing his 15th and last year on the Hall of Fame ballot and is the subject of a Hall of Fame campaign spearheaded by his son. At first glance, Murphy was clearly a better player than Clark. Murphy was a seven time All Star who won two MVP awards and finished in the top ten in MVP voting four times, while Clark was a four time All Star who finished in the top ten in MVP voting thrice, but never won. Murphy also had 215 hits and 58 more home runs than Clark. For good measure, Murphy won seven gold gloves and stole 161 bases, while Clark was never a Gold Glove candidate and only stole 77 bases in his career.
Upon further examination, the numbers tell a more complicated story. Clark walked 278 more times and grounded into 35 fewer double players than Murphy. More significantly, Clark was a valuable player as a 35 year old, while Murphy was essentially finished by the time he was 31. This leads to Clark's career numbers being slightly better than Murphy's .265/.346/.469. The biggest difference between the two may be that Murphy spent his best years playing in Atlanta, and his last year in Colorado meaning that 15 of his 18 years were played in good hitter’s park, while Clark spent the first 16 years of his career in parks that were unfriendly to right handed hitters. That is one of the reasons why Clark's OPS+ is 16 points higher than Murphy's, making him the better hitter over the course of his career.

The argument that Murphy was better than Clark and thus a legitimate Hall of Fame candidate comes down to three things, durability, defense and what might be called intangibles. Clark was troubled by injuries for most of his career, playing in about 200 fewer games, but still coming to bat 270 more times than Murphy, so Murphy does not get much, if any, credit for durability. Murphy at his peak was a better defender, but there is also evidence that like many gold glovers, he won those awards to some degree with his bat. On balance, Murphy was obviously a better defensive player than Clark, but the question of how much better is not clear. Similarly, Murphy should get some credit for his two MVP awards as well as being generally viewed as a decent man who played the game and conducted himself with integrity. Clark, however, also never was linked to steroids, was a decent man and played a key role on two Cardinal pennant winning teams. Any advantage to Murphy in his area is largely a triumph of spin over substance. Murphy was, like Jack Clark, a very good player, but he was not at all unambiguously better. On balance, the Hall of Fame voters were right on Murphy the last 14 years; and that should not change this year either.

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