

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Society going the wrong way for Fisk's tastes

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The sentiment for forgiving and forgetting PEDs-connected users as Hall of Fame candidates seems to be growing.

So is Carlton Fisk's distaste for a change in society that appears to be permitting that ever-so-slow movement.

"It's probably called the dumbing down of America," Fisk, Hall of Fame Class of 2000, said the other day at SoxFest. "It becomes such a permissive society that rules and regulations people feel have run its course."

The passage of time should not dim transgressions against the game's integrity, even as Mark McGwire and Barry Bonds re-establish themselves as hitting instructors while younger Hall of Fame voters seem willing to cast votes for PED-stained candidates.

"The fact that it happened hasn't disappeared," said Fisk. "Baseball should be viewed as a bastion of integrity. I don't believe that should be taken lightly. When you start saying you don't think it's that bad, you can say that any other kind of drug use is not bad, or any kind of promiscuousness in all walks of life are not that bad. There is a right and a wrong. We've been taught that."

Fisk, whose Cooperstown qualifications were split between the Red Sox and White Sox, was taught hard work and no short cuts were the only way to prepare for the game's most grueling position. There could be no artificial enhancements to keep a catcher going as an effective regular through age 43 in 1991 with the White Sox. It was all willpower and enthusiasm.

You wonder if the various prejudices and tilt toward sabermetrics would skew baseball management's perception of a 40-plus catcher today.



Hall of Famer Carlton Fisk (right) with 1983 "Winning Ugly" Sox teammate Ron Kittle at SoxFest.

“I think they give up on seasoned veterans a little too soon,” Fisk said. “They don’t take into account the experience factor and how an experienced catcher can influence the pitching staff. Too often when you get older the focus is on what you’re not doing as well as you used to do. When you get older, they focus on what you can’t do. When you’re younger, they focus on what you can do.”

“Even though there are certain things as you get older that you’re not doing quite as energetically as you did when you were 25, you’re still over the top effective and have value. Organizations should a little bit past that.”

Fisk’s “can-do” attributes past age 35 on the South Side were almost too numerous to count. He won two Silver Slugger awards, the last at age 40. At 39, he was the oldest catcher in major-league history to hit 20 homers, in 1987. At 43, Fisk was the oldest player to record a hit in an All-Star Game. Overall, he amassed the most number of homers (72) by a player older than 40 until the tainted Bonds (79) passed him up.

Meanwhile, at 41 Fisk led all AL catchers in fielding percentage in 1989.

Known as a workout fiend who’d pump iron after squatting up to 200 times behind the plate in a game, Fisk also possessed the requisite quality of enthusiasm.

“The big thing is you have to have a passion for what you’re doing,” said Fisk. “Two, you have to have a passion to prepare what for you’re doing. A lot of times when you get older, players don’t have that. You need the discipline within that passion to pursue it. You have to be focused.

“That’s what I think I did. There’s a lot of distractions today for players that don’t allow them (to compete at a high level). Or they don’t want to focus that long. They get pretty happy, pretty satisfied to round up their career earlier than I did. I always felt I had a talent. I wanted to display within the organization and the team framework until I couldn’t.

“It all boils back down to passion for the game. If you’re just using the game, then you don’t have that passion. It comes from within. If all you’re doing in your career is taking from the game, then you really don’t know the game.”

Such a line of thinking appears similar to what fellow Cooperstown enshrinee Andre Dawson told me around 1990. As a player in his mid-30s then, Dawson said he would not want to manage because even at that juncture in baseball, players were not as dedicated as when he came up. Dawson has never managed.

Neither has Fisk. Sometimes your standards might be too rigorous to apply to the average player. Which is good. When you compromise, you fall back. And, as the man said, perhaps we’re compromising our own principles as people with character flaws suddenly work their way back into baseball’s good graces.