

'Thank God!' Santo Gains Hall of Fame Induction at Last

By Paul Ladewski

Especially in his later years, life was a struggle for Ron Santo while he battled the ravages of diabetes. In that regard, maybe it was fitting that the former Cubs third baseman would have to wait 37 years after his retirement as a player to gain Hall of Fame induction.

On Monday morning, the National Baseball Hall of Fame announced that Santo was the only one of the 10 candidates on the Golden Era ballot to be afforded the highest individual honor in the game. He received the votes of all except one of the 16 committee members.

The news wasn't as good for Minnie Minoso, the former White Sox outfielder. He was named on nine ballots, three short of induction.

"It's a wonderful thing for Ron's family, the Cubs organization and their fans," said team radio voice Pat Hughes, who spent 15 years with Santo in the broadcast booth.

"My initial emotion was that we dared to dream this," Santo's widow Vicki said in a conference call after the announcement. "This was so important to Ron. When (former Cubs teammate) Billy Williams got on the phone and said, 'We finally got it done,' I started to cry. It's just a thrilling, thrilling day for us."

The announcement took place nearly one year to the day that Santo died because of complications with diabetes and bladder cancer. He was 70 years old.

"At the same time, I won't lie to you – there are some bittersweet feelings as well," added Hughes, who provided the eulogy at Santo's funeral services. "As overjoyed as many of us are today, we ask ourselves, 'Why didn't this happen 10 years ago?'"

Indeed, the announcement might have left the excitable Santo speechless for one of the few times in his life.

"I believe that he would have been stunned at first," Hughes said. "He wouldn't have known what to say right away."

What would have been the first words out of his mouth finally?

"A simple 'Thank God! Thank God!' probably," Hughes said. "I imagine that he would have acted like a combination of a senior citizen and a 10-year-old kid like he had all those years. All I can see is that smile on his face, the one that I saw so many times for 15 years."

The nine-time All-Star and five-time Gold Glove-winner was bitterly disappointed to have been bypassed in past elections. He made his opinion known more often in recent years.

In 2003, his frustration reached its greatest level. A Hall of Fame representative told him to expect a telephone call after the election.

"If somebody from the Hall of Fame had told you that beforehand, what would you expect?" Hughes said. "His hopes were never higher. He invited several friends and family members to his home. Television cameras were there. But when the person called, it wasn't to tell Ron that he would be in Hall of Fame but that he wouldn't be there. He was absolutely upset."

As it turned out, Santo received only 46-of-81 votes, 15 short of the required number.

Despite the setbacks, Santo never lost hope that his number would be called one day. His frequent trips to Wrigley Field did much to ease the mental pain.

"Ron wouldn't get his hopes up because he didn't want to be let down again," Hughes said. "But everywhere he went, people would tell him, 'You belong there.' Many of them were ballplayers and contemporaries. No, I don't believe he ever lost hope."

In 15 tries on the Baseball Writers Association of America ballot, Santo never received more than 43 percent of the vote. This time he was a near-unanimous selection.

What happened to change minds in one year?

“That's a good question,” Hughes said. “Only the committee members could answer it.”

The latest result suggests that, as a whole, baseball writers aren't nearly as impressed with his career .277 batting average, 2,254 hits, 342 home runs and 1,331 RBI as those who competed against him in the field.

In addition to Williams, the Golden Era panel included Hank Aaron, Al Kaline, Juan Marichal and Brooks Robinson, Hall of Famers who played with or against Santo for several seasons. He had much success against Marichal in his career. Robinson played third base, and along with Santo, they were widely considered to be the standard at the position in the 1960s decade. Santo and Williams were teammates for 14 seasons.

“When I saw who was on the panel this time, I liked his chances even better,” Hughes said. “I thought that his time might have arrived finally.”

Santo also had an admirer in commissioner Bud Selig, a Milwaukee native who grew up as a Braves fan and watched him play frequently. According to one insider, Selig worked behind the scenes on his behalf in recent months.

“I always admired Ron's courage and loyalty, and I miss him very much,” Selig said in a prepared statement. “Today I am so proud to know that his contributions to baseball will receive the highest honor. On behalf of Major League Baseball, I congratulate Ron's wife Vicki, their four children and their grandchildren.”

Santo became the 12th third baseman to be elected to the Hall of Fame and the first since Wade Boggs six years ago. He will be joined in the Class of 2012 induction by any electees in the BWAA vote, the results of which are scheduled to be announced next month.