

Hall of a debate



Ron Santo fell nine votes short in his latest Hall of Fame bid.

In Chicago, Ron Santo is a Hall of Famer beyond most reasonable doubts. So what do some in the Veterans Committee see in his career that others do not?

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Ask even a lukewarm Cubs fan if **Ron Santo** deserves to be in the Hall of Fame, and chances are he'll treat you like an alien from a land far, far away. Three-hundred-forty-two home runs. Nine All-Star Game appearances. Five Gold Glove Awards. By almost any statistical measure, he ranks on the short list of best third baseman of his time.

How can Ron Santo *not* be a Hall of Famer?

That the Veterans Committee closed the door on Santo once again earlier this week speaks of a different point of view, however. The panel is comprised of 64 persons. Each of them is a Hall of Famer himself. And each knows and understands what it takes to be one, presumably. So why did Santo receive only 61 percent of the vote, 14 short of the number required for induction? In the minds of some committee members, there are too many gray areas to allow for it, and here's what they are:

- Team success. In the prime of Santo's career, which extended from the 1963 to 1972 seasons, the Cubs lost more games (808) than they won (804). Only once did they total more than 87 victories in that span. Even so, in **Ernie Banks**, **Ferguson Jenkins** and **Billy Williams**, those Cubs teams boast three Hall of Fame players at present. By comparison, the 10 National League pennant-winners in that period produced an average of three Hall of

Fame players. The 1967-68 St. Louis Cardinals and 1972 Cincinnati Reds have four each, while the others have either two or three apiece.

If the Cubs had four legitimate Hall of Fame players for an extended period, the argument goes, then wouldn't they have won something? If the best teams produced no more than four Hall of Fame players, then on what basis does an average one merit that many?

- Signature moment. The majority of Hall of Famers are known for a game, series or season that defined their careers. What Santo is widely remembered for outside Chicago baseball circles has negative connotations -- his lead role in the Cubs collapse in the final month of the 1969 season.

The fall of the '69 Cubs began on Sept. 3, a downward spiral that coincided with the slump of their clean-up hitter. The North Siders dropped 11 of their next 12 games, a stretch in which Santo hit .206 and produced six RBI in 34 at-bats. His only extra-base hit was a double.

Santo was hardly the only Cubs player who failed to deliver in the stretch drive, but in his role as team captain, he was the most accountable one. In September, at a time when Santo could have carried his team to its first championship of any kind in 24 years, he hit .240 with one home run and 11 RBI and became a symbol of its demise instead.

- Individual dominance. Every Hall of Fame third baseman in the last half-century set the standard in a significant statistical category and/or was a Most Valuable Player selection at some point in their careers. Wade Boggs was a five-time batting champion and one-time hits leader. George Brett was a three-time batting champion, three-time hits leader and one time MVP choice. Eddie Mathews led the league in home runs on two occasions. Brooks Robinson was a one-time MVP and one-time RBI leader. Mike Schmidt was an eight-time home run champion, four-time RBI leader and three-time MVP.

In this regard, Santo falls short of the standards at his position. Although known primarily as a power hitter and run-producer, he never led the league in home runs, RBI or slugging percentage even though he played home games in a hitter-friendly ballpark in all except the final season of his career.

- Wrigley Field factor. There can be no doubt that the Santo who played at Wrigley Field is Hall of Fame material. At the Friendly Confines, he produced 33 home runs and 111 RBI per 600 at-bats, according to Retrosheet.com data. The Santo who played on the road was a decidedly different player, however. There he hit .260 and averaged 19 homers and 88 RBI per 600 official trips to the plate.

As a rule, players perform better at home than on the road, but in Santo's case, the difference is extreme. In his 10 prime years, Wrigley Field was the only National League ballpark that favored hitters in each one of them, a fact that suggests his longball ability was greatly enhanced by its dimensions and weather patterns.

- Intangibles. Santo is one of the few professional athletes whose popularity increased after his retirement. An inspiration to those afflicted with diabetes, which claimed his lower limbs, Santo has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to find a cure. As team radio commentator, he serves as a lovable spokesman for everyone who bleeds Cubbie blue around the country.

Yet a number of old-timers remember a different Santo, the outspoken, heel-clicking lightning rod who was known to call out teammates and embarrass opponents in public at a time when neither was an accepted practice in the game.

Some critics believe that Santo was a divisive force in the clubhouse, which may account for the fact that he never finished higher than fourth in any MVP vote. They point to an incident in July, 1969, when he vented on **Don Young** after the outfielder was guilty of defensive blunders in a series versus the New York Mets on the road. Young never got over the public humiliation and retired after the season, out of baseball at 24 years of age.

In his final season, Santo feuded with White Sox teammate **Dick Allen**, who later said that he left the club prematurely because of it.

Santo has lobbied to limit the number of voters in the selection process, and that what may be what it takes for him to reach Cooperstown, N.Y. Until then, at least to those who matter, he's worthy of the Hall of Very Good, not the Hall of Fame.