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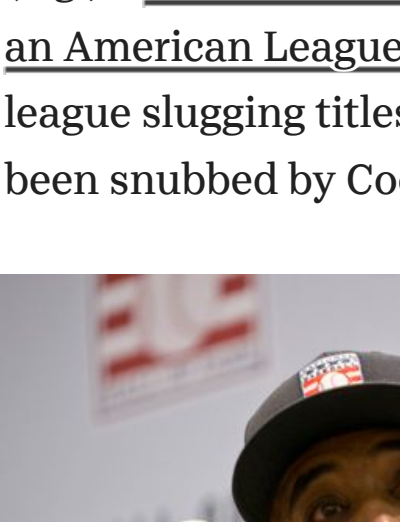
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OPINION

6 ways the Baseball Hall of Fame should revamp elections to prevent future Harold Baines

What would a Baseball Hall of Fame election process look like that is accountable to fans, promotes honest voting, and includes pre-vote deliberation?

ANIL KASHYAP AND ERIC MASKIN | OPINION CONTRIBUTORS 7:00 a.m. EST Jan. 22, 2019



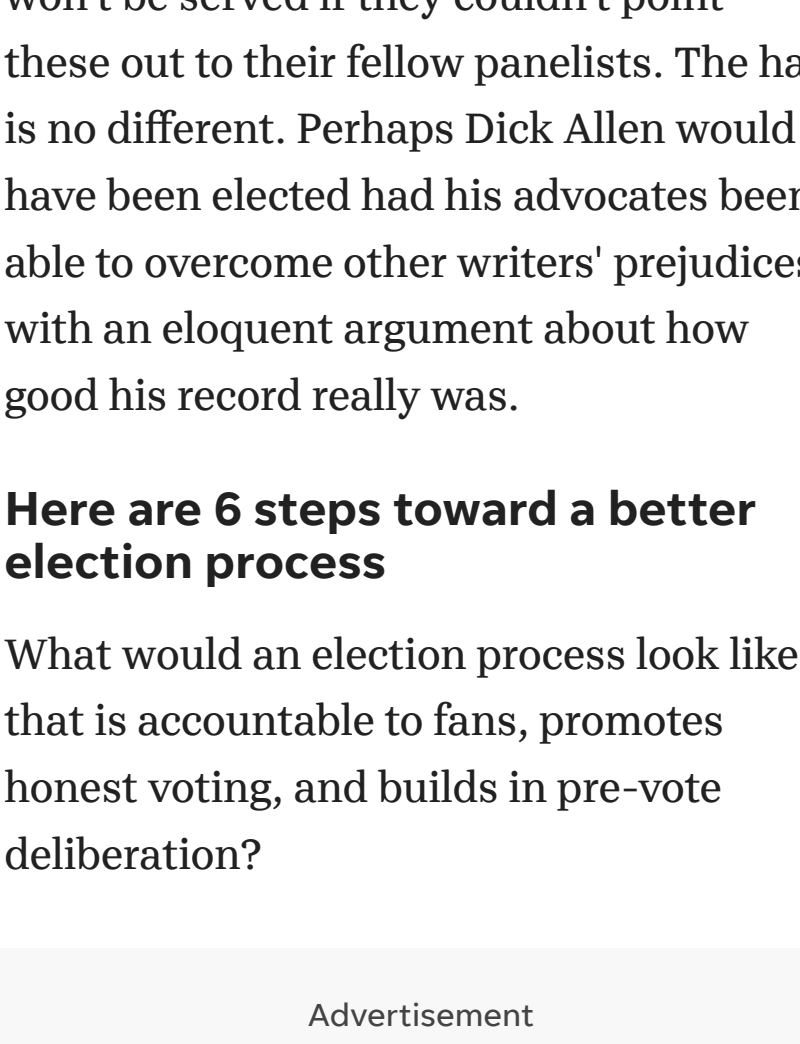
With the impending announcement of this year's inductees to the Baseball Hall of Fame, the selection process itself is, as usual, under attack — this time over the case of Harold Baines, a leading player of the 1980s and '90s.

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In December, a special committee reconsidering players who have exhausted their standard 10 years of eligibility chose Baines for the hall. This was met by outrage from numerous commentators, who griped that Baines' performance statistics fall well below normal standards (for example, in no season did he finish among the eight most valuable players in his league).

Through the years, there have been many other complaints of undeserved elections, as well as plenty of documented evidence that players have been mistakenly excluded. A prime example of the latter is Dick Allen, who compiled a stellar record (e.g., a Rookie of the Year Award in 1964, an American League MVP in 1972 and four league slugging titles), but has (so far) been snubbed by Cooperstown.



National Baseball Hall of Fame inductee Harold Baines DANIEL CLARK/USA TODAY NETWORK

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People will no doubt complain about the Hall of Fame no matter what it does (complaining is part of the sport). But it could greatly reduce the number of contentious cases were its election rules reformed to adhere to a few commonsense principles.

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Mistake or not, electing Baines violated the principle that the hall should operate for the benefit of the fans. This doesn't mean that fans themselves should vote on whom to enshrine; only a fraction have the expertise and judgment to do that well. But whoever does vote should feel accountable to fans. That criterion is met by baseball writers; their newspapers will be inundated with angry letters if they don't vote thoughtfully. However, the Baseball Writers' Association of America didn't elect Baines (they consider only recently retired players); instead, it was a 16-person committee consisting mostly of former players and baseball executives, including (disturbingly) the former owner, the general manager and the field manager of a team Baines had played for.

Existing voting rules prevent good inductees

We presumably want voters for the Hall of Fame to vote according to their honest evaluations of the candidates. But the existing rules deter honest voting among baseball writers — and Dick Allen's candidacy may well have suffered as a result. Specifically, each writer is limited to voting for just 10 players. This means that she will be reluctant to throw a vote away on someone she deems worthy of election but too controversial to get much other support (a player needs the support of 75 percent of writers to be elected). And Allen was certainly controversial, with a cantankerous personality and an outspokenness that weren't always tolerated in black players of that era.

It also didn't help his case that the baseball writers don't meet face-to-face to discuss candidates. We wouldn't think well of a criminal court system in which members of a jury had no opportunity to deliberate before rendering a verdict — some jurors might notice subtle but important facts in the trial, and justice won't be served if they couldn't point these out to their fellow panelists. The hall is no different. Perhaps Dick Allen would have been elected had his advocates been able to overcome other writers' prejudices with an eloquent argument about how good his record really was.

Here are 6 steps toward a better election process

What would an election process look like that is accountable to fans, promotes honest voting, and builds in pre-vote deliberation?

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► It would get fans into the act by giving them the opportunity to nominate players — including those already past their 10-year eligibility limit (the 10-year limit is another procedural defect that clearly discourages sincere voting; indeed, a player nearing the end of his eligibility tends to get more votes).

► It would draw a representative sample of baseball writers — not the entire association — to serve as the jury. The sample would be big enough to avoid the effect of cronyism as in the Baines episode, but small enough to fit in one room.

► It would have every juror vote "no" for each nominee she considers hall-unworthy. Then, it would drop the candidates with the most no votes, so that 15 names remain.

► It would continue to use committees to reevaluate players from previous eras (after all, memories are short), but would put their selections on the ballot with the other 15 players — instead of directly into the hall (the current practice, which doesn't respect accountability to fans).

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► It would convene the jury in person and have them conduct a thorough discussion of the 15+ nominees on the ballot.

► It would have every juror vote yes or no on each nominee, with the same 75 percent threshold of yes votes needed for election as now.

Knowledgeable readers will notice that our proposed rules share some similarities with those of the Football Hall of Fame (ours, we claim, are better). But this wouldn't be the first time that an old and storied institution can learn from a young upstart.

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