

**Feb. 25, 2003 - In Defense of Dick Allen
by Brad Harris**

We know the Hall of Fame's Veterans Committee has been made larger. This week, we'll find out if the changes to its structure have made the voters any wiser. A big part of that answer is whether or not Dick Allen is elected.

Two weeks ago, fellow BaseballTruth.com contributor Will Christensen had this to say about Allen, as he reviewed the 2003 Veterans Committee ballot:

For a long time I thought he was deserving. He had great numbers even during a time when great numbers were a rarity. The first problem is that his teams almost never won and that Allen, known as a clubhouse cancer who bounced around from team to team his entire career, might have had something to do with that off the field. On the field, I don't see how you can make that case. He totaled 342 win shares, the most of any candidate on this ballot and in the top 100 all time, in only 1,749 games. That's another problem: Allen's career was relatively short. Because of that, his standards score barely tops the fluke level at 36. But the biggest problem with Allen is where he stands among players not in. Allen is not the best player not in the Hall of Fame, not even at his position -- first base. James has Allen ranked 15th all-time, although it would appear he docked Allen a fair amount on the subjective level because of his off-field conduct. He's behind five players who are not in the Hall. Two are active and two are not yet eligible for election. The fifth is Don Mattingly, who is a long way from being elected by the writers. Should Mattingly, at 12th overall, go in ahead of Allen? Maybe. Allen was by far the more productive player, but I guess the question is how much weight should be attached to Allen's problems. I was too young, so I have to rely on others and the subjective record is not good. A better question is should either go in at all? I might be inclined to say yes, and if one goes in so probably should the other, but because Mattingly isn't there yet, Allen should have to wait.

With all due respect, no, he shouldn't. He should be right at the top (or darn near it) of every voter's ballot.

Allen appeared in 1,749 games over a 15-year career. During that time, he amassed 1,848 hits, 320 doubles, 351 home runs, 1,099 runs and 1,119 runs batted in. His lifetime batting average of .292 is as impressive as his career slugging percentage of .534 and his .378 on-base percentage.

Will lists three "problems" with Allen's candidacy: Allen's teams failed to win and that he was responsible for their lack of accomplishment. This is like saying Ernie Banks shouldn't be in the Hall of Fame because his teams never won a pennant. Of course the big difference between Banks and Allen is that Banks was well-liked by the press and Allen was the victim of constant harassment by them.

The first black man to play professional baseball in Little Rock, Ark. (his first minor-league club), Allen endured a great deal to get to the major leagues. Allen was a middle infielder and outfielder until he was called up to Philadelphia, but Gene Mauch decided to employ Allen at third base instead. Allen made a great many errors in his first season but had a fine throwing arm. The press blamed the 1964 Phillies' collapse on Allen's

fielding, despite the fact Allen was voted National League Rookie of the Year that season and was the most valuable player on the team.

Allen contributed to his teams in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Los Angeles and Chicago and was highly regarded by both his managers and teammates, despite the revisionism that has gone on thanks to uniformed comments about Allen published by a certain sabermetrician recently hired by the Red Sox.

The myths of Allen being a bad apple, of his (undeserved) reputation as a malingerer and divisive presence in the clubhouse were thoroughly debunked in Craig Wright's excellent article Dick Allen: Another View. It is an excellent piece of first-hand research with scores of quotes from direct interviews with those who were there -- in the clubhouse with Allen.

*Editor's Note: Wright's article can be found at:
<http://www.whitesoxinteractive.com/rwas/index.php?category=11&id=2065>*

If, after reading that, you're still convinced Allen was a cancer, then nothing I say here will dissuade you otherwise.

Will then raised the objection of Allen's career being short, with a specific reference to his low standards score -- actually 38.7, not 36 -- which "barely tops the fluke level."

Here are some more numbers for you.

Fifty-five and 132. There are 132 position players in the Hall of Fame based on their major-league playing careers. Only 55 of those men have a standards score of 50 or higher. If a standards score of 50 is supposed to represent the "average" Hall of Famer, then why don't 66 of the 132 position players have a score of 50 or better? OK, pitchers, several of whom have very high scores, have been taken out, but it's also because the standards score being used is the same one published a decade ago by James; the "standards" haven't been updated in 10 years. The fact is the average standards score should be somewhere around 46, not 50.

In case you're wondering, Banks, Kiki Cuyler, Sam Thompson and Heinie Manush are "average" Hall of Famers with this revision. Allen doesn't look so bad now, eh?

Furthermore, look at the careers most of those players had -- much longer than 1,749 games. That Allen's accomplishments are so close to being in the midst of guys who played more games is a testament to the fact that he was, indeed, a truly great player.

In short (forgive the pun), the brevity of his career makes his career numbers that much more impressive, rather than less.

But this is all so much icing on the cake. The real crux of Will's argument against voting for Allen on this ballot is that Allen should have to wait until we decide if other first baseman (and he uses Don Mattingly as an example) are elected.

I'm going to ignore the ridiculous nature of that argument because Mattingly is not on this ballot yet. What the Veterans Committee should be asking themselves are: "Who's the best first baseman on this ballot? Dick Allen? Ted Kluszewski? Gil Hodges?" and, secondly, "Does the best one (and I say it's Allen) belong in Cooperstown or not?" Because if he does, they need to re-examine the next-best guy on the ballot and, if he doesn't deserve a plaque, the voters will know where they've drawn the line and can stop wasting time with support of Hodges and Big Klu.

But the primary flaw in Will's reasoning against Allen's election this year has nothing to do with Will's train of thought and everything to do with the fact that most of us are just plain lazy.

Too lazy to check the facts for ourselves. Too lazy to do the research. Too lazy to think for ourselves. It's much easier if we just subscribe to someone else's opinion, assuming they've done the work for us, especially someone who has a credible history in this department. Someone like Bill James.

James' misportrayal of Dick Allen's personal issues is a one-sided character assassination that left no room for doubt in the minds of his readers that Allen was a bad apple. And, of course, a "bad guy" like that didn't belong in the Hall of Fame.

Between a number of discussions I've had with others about Allen and my verification of those facts, along with the first-hand information presented by Wright in his well-researched article, I think James got it wrong.

Allen's personal issues were nothing to dwell on, nothing to merit the poor reputation he seems to carry with him and certainly nothing to keep him out of the Hall of Fame.

If anything, Allen was a near-model ballplayer -- someone who carried the team on his back through injuries, adversity and the daily scrutiny of an unfriendly press. Allen was a star with an undeservedly poor reputation who sometimes let it all get to him, adding to the general misunderstanding between fans and himself. But he was good to his teammates -- Mike Schmidt has said Allen's assistance early in his career was invaluable to his future success. And he was a heckuva ballplayer. There's nothing in the "intangibles" that can obscure that to the point where his Hall of Fame credentials should be in doubt.

James' bias -- whether personal or simply uninformed -- extends into his New Historical Baseball Abstract. Allen rates 15th all-time among first baseman and, after running the numbers James used in his rankings formula, I can say why: It's because Allen received almost no credit for the "subjective record." James' rankings of the top 100 players at each position are based on six factors.

1. Career value (measured by win shares)
2. Three-year peak value (best three seasons)
3. Five-year peak value (best five consecutive seasons)
4. Average seasonal value
5. Timeline adjustment
6. Subjective record

The first four are objective measurements of the players' value, as stated by win shares. The fifth factor is a small number (pretty much between four and 18) which is supposed to account for the incremental increase in the quality of play between the early days of baseball and the modern game.

The final factor is a number between one and 50, to account for the various "intangibles" that can't be measured or aren't very well accounted for. Everything from missed seasons due to racial prejudice or service time in the war, to postseason performance. It's all squeezed in there. What people may not realize is that this immeasurable factor is given a greater capacity to influence the rankings for all players than any of the other five. It's the largest single factor of the six.

Of course, James had to do this to rank players as he saw fit, rather than stick solely to the output given by his own win-shares-based formula.

I have begun the arduous task of breaking down James' lists and applying his formula to all players for which I have the win-shares data. This allows me to arrive at a composite value by which to rank players using James' method minus the "subjective elements."

Here's what we find for first basemen:

James w/subjective	James w/o subjective
Lou Gehrig	Gehrig
Jimmie Foxx	Dick Allen
Mark McGwire	Foxx
Jeff Bagwell	Bagwell
Eddie Murray	Will Clark
Johnny Mize	Thomas
Harmon Killebrew	McCovey
Hank Greenberg	McGwire
Willie McCovey	Mize
Frank Thomas	Killebrew

I'm not saying there shouldn't be a subjective element, but what James does is maximize its use beyond the point of being of any real value and making the rankings almost more subjectively based than objectively based.

While many assumed James used the win-shares method (a fairly solid statistical approach to summarizing a player's worth) in these formulas, the extent to which these rankings have been tainted with James' opinions is much greater than I expected from the world's most popular sabermetrician.

Don't be too surprised by the addition of Will Clark to the list, either. He also enjoyed a great prime, which is heavily rewarded (and inequitably weighted) in James' formula. But at least that standing is without the benefit of saying "he was a great clutch hitter while this other guy was not," or "he wasn't played full-time when he should have been," or

whatever other factors James has thrown in there. (He describes them all in the Abstract.)

Admit it, most of you just dove into the results as well, without really thinking through the equation first. It's the mistake I made. It's the mistake a lot of us made. And for us to go around throwing out that Dick Allen should have to wait for election to the Hall of Fame because Don Mattingly rates a few places ahead of him is for us to ignore what those rankings really mean and how they were arrived at.

Mattingly appeared in 36 more games and had 407 more plate appearances than Allen. Both players had short careers for a Hall of Famer and both were riddled with injuries for at least the second half of them.

Dick Allen had an OPS+ of 156 while Don Mattingly's stood at just 127. That's a huge difference over 1,700+ games.

Furthermore, if you look at the composite value of these two players' James rankings, Allen's 147.41 is the second-best total by any first baseman in history while Mattingly's 126.47 is good enough for just 14th. Allen's value supercedes Mattingly's by more than 16 percent.

There's no question Allen was the better player. Now by any objective measuring of the "intangibles" (particularly with the evidence presented by Craig Wright in his fine defense of Allen), there's absolutely no justification for giving Don Mattingly an edge as big as James has given him.

If you need further proof of James' bias, just read his comment under Mattingly's entry in the Abstract.

This is a vindication of the greatness of Dick Allen, the ballplayer. Dick Allen, the human being, wasn't any worse than a hundred of the men who've made it into the Hall of Fame. There is no evidence to support the claim that he was responsible for his teams' poor performance. In fact, the facts point towards the opposite conclusion: that Allen deserved the most credit for what success his teams did experience.

And that, if nothing else, goes a long way towards defining Allen as a Hall of Famer.

There is no justification for Allen to wait to be elected. None whatsoever. His exclusion from the Hall of Fame is a black mark on the institution and a testament to how lazy we fans are in checking our facts. Shame on the voters. Shame on us.

Allen deserves better. I hope he gets it this week.