

Let's Tweak the Hall of Fame Voting

An Opinion by the Editor

It's time to do something about the Hall of Fame voting.

Before I get into what should be done, let me point out that I have never been one to do that annual whine about "How could those idiots fail to elect So-and-so?" To me that's an easy column for any sportswriter because there's ALWAYS someone who could arguably be chosen for enshrinement but missed the cut. I think there are writers who keep that column on file and just change the name of the Omitted One each year.

There's a whole roster of former players I'd personally put into the Hall plus several coaches and executives. But I also recognize that people who know as much as I do (and maybe a lot more) honestly disagree. And they may well be right.

For those who don't know how it works, this is the procedure.

First off, there are 38 voters. They aren't just the first 38 folks who happened to show up. They are longtime observers of the pro football scene, mostly newspaper writers, who have shown themselves to be knowledgeable, fair, and accurate – one for each team in the NFL plus a few at-large selectors and a representative from the football writers association.

Every year they start with a boatload of nominees for enshrinement. Anyone – you, me, the guy down the block – can nominate someone for the Hall. If you want to nominate your crazy uncle who once watched a game on television, you can. It won't do you or your uncle any good, of course. The first thing the selectors do is cut the list down to manageable size. If a nominee has no support, he's dropped from this year's consideration. By December, the list is down to fourteen modern candidates and one veterans' committee nominee.

To be eligible, a player must be retired for five years. A modern candidate must have played the bulk of his career within the last twenty years. The veterans' committee nominee will be someone who played the bulk of his career more than twenty years earlier. Once upon a time, the selectors would come up with numerous "old timers" to consider, but they found that the senior nominees got outvoted by more modern candidates and no vets were getting elected. The present system is an effort to find a fair solution. The upside is it gives the veterans' committee nominee a fair chance; the downside is that there are many, many possible candidates who will never be voted on.

Before the final vote, that group of fifteen (fourteen modern players and one senior nominee) is reduced to the top six plus the vet candidate. All of the selectors then vote yes or no on each of these nominees. Although they can elect as many as seven, the committee must elect at least four.

Generally speaking, I like this system better than the one used to elect to baseball's Hall of Fame. In baseball, every card-carrying member of the baseball writers association gets a ballot. A brilliant and insightful member can have his vote cancelled by some guy who hasn't watched a baseball game in years. Many baseball writers don't vote at all. And too often the Veterans' Committee selections, which are handled separately, end up as no more than a way to do something nice for an old buddy.

So, if I like the Pro Football Hall of Fame's selection process so much, why do I want to change it?

I'll get to that in a minute. First, let me tell you what I would not do.

The suggestion has been made that the vote be opened up to all the football writers, plus members of the radio and TV community. I think that goes too far. It incorporates all the bad features of the baseball selections. It brings in voters who don't know a belly series from a belly button. It dilutes the vote so that no one bears any responsibility for a poor vote. And it encourages some people who should vote to say, "Wothehell! My vote doesn't mean much," and skip voting.

Democracy is important when you're voting for a government. The elected are going to pass laws that you will have to live under. Everyone should have a say. But the Hall of Fame is an honor. The selectors should be recognized as having some degree of expertise. Improving the system takes only a little tweaking, not a complete overhaul.

What got me to thinking about this was the candidacies of Carl Eller and Lynn Swann this year. Once again, they made the Top 15 list. They get that far every year. But they never quite make it.

I'm not going to make a speech on behalf of either. Obviously, a number of selectors believe they are absolutely qualified for enshrinement in the Hall. And a number of selectors believe they are not. The point is that when they were announced as Top 15-ers this year, you could have taken a pencil and crossed their names off then and there.

The make-up of the selection board changes very little from year to year. Unless someone dies or retires, the people voting this year are the same ones who voted last year. A candidate who has missed out a couple of times may get voted in when a couple of selectors reconsider his qualifications, but Eller and Swann have been up so many times that it's unrealistic to expect any change in the voters' thinking. Opinions have hardened into absolutes.

So long, Lynn and Carl!

But remember, they are only 38 opinions.

I don't want to see a batch of know-nothings making the selections, but I can't believe that these are the only 38 people qualified to give their opinions. For example, I live near Pittsburgh, certainly not a huge media market. Yet, I can name at least three sportswriters whose opinions I respect in addition to the one Pittsburgh guy on the Selection Committee.

I'd like some second opinions.

What I would suggest is that not one but three representatives be chosen for each team and a likewise larger pool of at-large selectors. Immediately after each year's vote on enshrinees, the next year's voters should be chosen by lot. No stacking the deck. Only one voter from each city. Still only 38 votes. But each year, the makeup of the committee would change while still maintaining the quality the Hall of Fame must have.

By doing this, we would get a wider range of qualified voters without expanding the actual voting committee to an unwieldy number. Swann and Eller and several others might still be excluded after a couple years, but we would have a far firmer grasp on the legitimacy of their candidacies.

Those of us who care passionately about the Hall of Fame but see some favorite candidate locked out year after year would be left with very little room to rail about the voting.

I've often said that I believe the Pro Football Hall of Fame has the fairest voting procedure of all the sports halls. I've seen criticisms, but very few come from folks who actually take the time to look into the voting procedure. That said, I think this slight tweaking could help make it a little better.