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News staff photo by ANDRES CAAMANO

Hall of Fame inductee Jim Rice accepts his plaque Sunday from Jeff Idelson, president for the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Hall Chairwoman Jane Forbes Clark, second from right, and Bud Selig, commissioner of Major League Baseball.

After 15 long years, Rice takes his place among the game's greats

BY ANDRES CAAMANO
ASSISTANT EDITOR

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — For some who might have watched a player in their waning years, especially those who play into their 40s but show little of the skill they did at the top of their game, it often clouds one's vision of why such a person should be honored with becoming one of the newest members of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

I can completely understand, as when I began to watch baseball for the first time in the mid-80s, Jim Rice was unfortunately in the midst of the swan song stage of his career. It was just his misfortune that Lasik eye surgery hadn't been invented yet, or his issues with his eyesight could have been dealt with and likely extended his career a few more years, allowing him to pile onto his already impressive career stats.

While the likes of Cal Ripken were inducted without nary a voice of disapproval just two years ago, Ripken never struck the sort of fear that Rice did while at the plate, even if



News staff photo by ANDRES CAAMANO

The Baseball Hall of Fame's most recent inductees, Rickey Henderson and Jim Rice, hug after Henderson finishes his acceptance speech Sunday in Cooperstown, N.Y.

that period amounted to only seven years for Rice.

• For additional coverage of Sunday's Hall of Fame induction, turn to pages 3 and 7.

As Goose Gossage, one of the game's best relievers when Rice was tearing up the majors, said: "No hitter ever scared me, but Jim Rice came to the clos-

est. That guy put the fear of God into you; he was so strong."

While Ripken was blessed with the amazing fortune of being able to play every day and stay healthy for virtually his whole 21-year career, Rice wasn't blessed similarly, and had to watch as his production quickly plummeted at the relatively young age of 36.

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For former Sox slugger Rice, induction into Hall of Fame better late than never

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And so, because of a combination of his shortened career — and his well-known issues with the media — the former Red Sox slugger had to wait an excruciatingly long 15 years to be inducted into the Hall.

Then again, for Rice, to emphasize how the wait wasn't as tough as one might first perceive, Rice noted during his induction speech Sunday that when he got the call from the Hall to notify him of his induction, he was watching his favorite show, "The Young and the Restless," before adding, "What matters is that I got it."

While Ripken was able to play in 3,001 games over his time while wearing a single uniform in Baltimore, Rice had to hang up the cleats after a career that stretched over just 16 seasons, covering only 2,089 games. Even with the wide disparity of games played, or plate appearances (12,883 for Ripken, with only 9,058 for Rice), many of Rice's other career numbers were only slightly behind that of the career Oriole. Ripken holds the edge in home runs (431 to 382), and also had 244 more career RBIs. While that might sound like a wide disparity, when averaged out over a career, Rice broke down to averaging 30 home runs and 113 RBIs over a 162-game season, while Ripken's numbers averaged out at 23 HRs and 91 RBIs. While Ripken twice was honored with MVP status, in 1983 and 1991, one could argue that only his first MVP season was one where Ripken's production made him the obvious choice. That year, Ripken finished first in the league in games played (something he did nine times in his career), to go with most plate appearances, at-bats, runs, hits and doubles.

It's not to claim that Ripken was an unworthy Hall of Famer, but only to point out that Ripken got in on a landslide on his first try, while Rice — whose career numbers compare favorably — had to wait until his final year to make it in.

For Rice, though, such offensive statistics were the norm at the height of his career, as he finished first in the league in total bases four times, twice in slugging percentage, and with his stellar year of 1978, he led the league in 11 statistical categories, including his 46 home runs and 139 RBIs (numbers that look better upon realizing they weren't done during the steroid crazy years of the past decade). Rightfully so, Rice finished with MVP honors that season.

As amazing as those numbers clearly were, learning that with Rice racking up 400 total bases that season, he became the first American Leaguer in 40 years to cross that threshold, the last being Joe DiMaggio in 1937, only adds weight to that impressive year.

Over a seven-year span, the

'What matters is I got it.'

— Jim Rice

right-handed hitter finished with at least 39 home runs four times, and led the league with those numbers in three of those seasons. Making such numbers even more impressive was that for Rice, though, it wasn't as if he needed time to get adjusted to the majors, as he jumped right into the fray, finishing second in Rookie of the Year voting to teammate Fred Lynn.

For Rice, though, the most frustrating part of that 1975 season wasn't losing out to Lynn for Rookie of the Year honors, but that he had broken his hand late in the season and missed the entire post-season. In Rice's eyes, he said Sunday in his speech that had he been able to play that post-season, the Sox were then primed to break the championship-less run then of 57 years, only for that run to extend another 29 years before finally coming to an end in 2004.

In knowing that Rice could have had an easier time being voted in, "only if," it's almost the same argument that has been mentioned in recent years with "The Splendid Splinter," or "Teddy Ballgame" about what sort of numbers would Ted Williams have been able to rack up had he not served twice with the Marines, from 1942-46 and 1952-53, and erased three full seasons, and parts of two off his potential baseball resume to further improve his career standing?

For Jim Rice, his wait was clearly longer than it should have been, as he was one of baseball's most feared hitters in his prime — the sort of recognition that makes induction a natural part of the process.

Unfortunately for Rice, his window of his best years were shorter than many inducted in the Hall, because of a string of injuries, and therefore, he had to wait 15 years of induction votes until getting the good news. For those who might doubt his membership into the Hall, remember that even with just playing just 16 years, he retired having only trailed Williams and Carl Yastrzemski — both Hall members — on the Red Sox list of all-time leaders for home runs, RBIs, hits and total bases. Therefore, when it came to this year, and on his final try, and becoming only the third player to make it in on that last vote, the voters were right to see his worthiness as one to enter the esteemed halls at Cooperstown, N.Y.

acaamano@thegardnernews.com