

'The Man of Steal' finds a home in Cooperstown

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COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — While most of Red Sox Nation had been waiting for the day to finally arrive for Jim Rice to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, for me the excitement of Sunday afternoon's induction squarely was with that of Rickey Henderson being honored, as "Rickey" further entrenched his way into baseball lore for being the fastest man on the base paths in the history of the game.

Looking back, it was as if Henderson almost made a mockery of a litany of all-time and season records, many of which had been in the steward of Lou Brock. As was Rickey's style, it wasn't a case of just barely breaking records, but utterly shattering them. Most notable of those was when on May 1, 18 years ago, Henderson stole the 939th base of his career, eclipsing the record that had stood with Brock for almost 12 years.

To think that Henderson would then be at the downside of his career at that juncture, allowing him only to creep by Brock's mark in the record books was anything but, as Henderson went on to steal an additional 468 bases over his storied 25-year major league career.

In all, Henderson eclipsed Brock by having 50 percent more stolen bases than the former base stealing record holder, making it obvious that in the race of the game's best base stealer, Henderson was striding ahead of the rest. When thinking about his nickname, "The Man of Steal," in correlation with Superman, one wondered if Henderson only didn't wear a cape because it might have slowed him down.

Which makes Henderson's accomplishments even more noteworthy, because there was the chance he might not have played the game professionally.

"My dream was to play football for the Oakland Raiders," noted Henderson during his acceptance speech Sunday. For Henderson, though, it was hardly a far-fetched dream, as he had been a standout during his high school football years and received numerous scholarship offers, but chose to forgo college.

If not for his mother's concern about his getting injured on the football field, he might have donned a football helmet, and considering his speed on the base paths, it's hard to imagine that he wouldn't have torn up his share of turf for a successful NFL career if he had chosen that path.

His mother wasn't alone in having him choose to play baseball, as Henderson recalled the combined efforts of a coach to "bribe" him with doughnuts and hot chocolate to play baseball, and a guidance counselor who did so with quarters for each hit, run scored and stolen base.

With those combined efforts, Rickey then chose to play baseball and after being drafted in the fourth round in the 1976 draft (think of all the missed opportunities that every team had in drafting him earlier), he only had to wait three years before playing his first game with the A's on June 24, 1979.



News staff photo by ANDRES CAAMANO
Rickey Henderson shows his Hall of Fame plaque to the crowd of 21,000 that gathered during the induction ceremonies Sunday at Cooperstown, N.Y., as Jeff Idelson, left, president for the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Hall Chairwoman Jane Forbes Clark, second from right, and Bud Selig, commissioner of Major League Baseball, look on.

Henderson recalled that day of that callup Sunday, and how Oakland A's owner Charlie Finley made the call, and how he was ecstatic at the opportunity. "To play in my hometown, in front of friends and family was a dream come true," noted Henderson.

For anyone who watched Henderson at his best, he was unlike most of the men whose plaques surround his inside the gallery in Cooperstown, his most amazing work was *after* making it on base. For all the sluggers in the Hall whose stardom grew with each blast over the outfield fence, Henderson did his most damage by forcing pitchers to pay an incredible amount of attention to his dancing on the base paths, forcing pitchers to throw back to his base in a futile attempt to pick off Henderson. Wherever Henderson donned a jersey, and there were nine different ones — much different from Rice, who donned a single one over his career — Rickey knew the fans loved him. For so many of those fans, they enjoyed each time that they could boo the opposing pitcher who would spend so much time throwing pickoff throws to force Henderson to step back or dust himself off, and therefore slow the game down a few more minutes.

To make it abundantly obvious that he wasn't bothered by such pickoff attempts, Henderson once was quoted as saying, "If my uniform doesn't get dirty, I haven't done anything in the baseball game."

On the many days that Henderson would make it on base at least four times a game, either by a walk — of which he amassed an eye-popping 2,190 over his career, leading the league four times and tallying a career high of 126 in 1989 before later ceding the all-time walks spot to Barry Bonds — or by a hit, it would be a rather easy task to add at least 20 minutes to a "time of game" for time spent on pick off attempts and the such.

And it's not as if Henderson didn't have any pop in his bat either. Considered by virtually anyone with an understanding of the game to be the best leadoff hitter of all time, Henderson still holds the record for home runs to lead off a game with 81. During his career, Rickey hammered 297

home runs to go with 1,115 RBIs. It was as if the only time in his career where he was recognized for the amazing superstar that he was, was during the 1990 season, at the age of 31. That season, to go with a decent number of stolen bases — 65 (a number he would eclipse in nine of his other seasons, even eight years later in his final stint with the A's at the age of 39), Henderson stood out by leading the league in runs scored (119) and stolen bases, finishing second in batting average to George Brett (.325), to go with matching a career-high in home runs (28), which highlighted his league-best and career highs for on-base percentage (.439) and OPS, or on-base plus slugging percentage (1.016, a career high).

With that combination, Henderson was selected as the league's MVP. In seven other seasons, Henderson finished in the voting, but failed to finish with the top honor. Even with the 28 home runs in the 1990 season, though, and for what one could argue was a more well-rounded season for Henderson, the degree to which he caused havoc to opposing pitchers was at a much higher level during his early years with Oakland. Most notable were 1982 and 1983 when he racked up 238 stolen bases. In 1982, Henderson was able to erase Brock's name from the single-season stolen bases mark, eclipsing Brock's 118 thefts just eight years earlier, as Rickey snagged 130 bases that season.

And despite that accomplishment, to go with a league-high 116 walks, and 119 runs scored, Henderson only finished 10th in MVP voting. For as solid players as Doug DeCinces, Hal McRae, Cecil Cooper, Dwight Evans, or Gorman Thomas ever were in their careers, it's hard to look back now and try to even argue whether any of them created as many problems for opposing pitchers as Henderson did that year. Even if Milwaukee's Robin Yount practically ran away with the award that year, earning 27 of 28 first-place votes, Henderson's 10th place showing is hard to fathom. If the award was "Most Powerful Hitter," Henderson's aptitude on the bases would have done little to earn him votes. But with it being "Most Valuable Player," it begs to question if some votes are tabulat-

ed by individuals who look at the stat sheets, and don't bother watching the games, to watch what sort of impact Henderson had that year, and for so many that followed.

Even though Henderson found himself switching teams an incredible 13 times during his major league years, the city where he became such a force — hometown Oakland — was the team where he spent all or parts of 13 seasons with, during four stints with the A's.

In asking Henderson how he thought he could have been able to spend four stints with the same team during his career, he said, "When Oakland was telling me they were going to trade me to Toronto, I was like 'no,' but they told me that when you become a free agent, we will bring you back. It was like a Catch-22 deal, as I was going to be helping the ball club, and to get them players for the playoffs."

In being traded to the Yankees, he helped for more than four seasons, with the A's getting Stan Javier, Jay Howell, Jose Rijo, Eric Plunk and Tim Lincecum. While Rijo provided a few moments of solid play for the A's, this trade once again proved that trading quality for quantity often leaves one with plenty of pieces, but little in return.

And during the first three of those four seasons without Henderson, the A's scuffled, finishing with a rather uninspiring 234-252 record over that span. In 1988, even without Henderson, the A's were able to catch fire with a 104-58 record, but after losing to the Los Angeles Dodgers in five games in the World Series, he found his way back to Oakland the next year.

At the same time, the Yankees were able to amass a 468-407 during Henderson's time wearing the pinstripes, with the team's best season being 1985, when the Yanks finished 33 games above .500. And while in the Bronx, in that short time, Henderson was able to set a career franchise mark for stolen bases, with 326, and three times rewriting the team's single season record, going from 80 steals, then 87, and in his final full season with the Yanks, he snagged 93 bases.

When the Yanks tripped off the starting blocks with a 1-7 record in 1989, though, the team as a whole couldn't find its stride by late June, and traded Henderson back to the A's on June 21, with the Yanks then just 33-35 (with Plunk somehow going back the other way, for being part of a Henderson deal once again). For the Yanks, without Henderson, they fell even further, going 41-52 the remainder of the season without Rickey.

The A's meanwhile, with the contributions of Henderson, were able to finish the season at 99-63, as Rickey finished ninth in MVP voting, by finishing a league-best in walks (126), runs (113), and steals (77). It would be Henderson's next full season with the A's that he would become an MVP, and make Yankees general manager Bob Quinn (and most likely owner George Steinbrenner as well) asking how they could have let Henderson come back to tear up the league in hometown Oakland.

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