

Put Rose Almost in The Hall Of Fame

By James Reston Jr.

It was the uniqueness of the late Commissioner of Baseball, A. Bartlett Giamatti, that he could speak to the wider significance of baseball to American life. In no debate is he more sorely missed than the issue of whether Pete Rose should be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

As a scholar of Renaissance poetry and Greek mythology, he would have seen the issue of Rose's induction not as a question of fame, but of honor. Rose is the most famous baseball player in modern history. He will be remembered 100 years from now with Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth when the names of Mickey Mantle and Carl Yastrzemski have been forgotten.

Induction into the Hall of Fame is baseball's highest honor. The induction ceremony is a time for the baseball world to gather in celebration. They gather to honor a player, an American game, and more than that, as Giamatti understood, an American institution.

How could such a ceremony be held for Pete Rose? To honor a disgraced player who has disgraced the game? To write the very sentence shows its impossibility. The ceremony alone would tear the game apart. It would be like gathering to dedicate a glossy, new Presidential library for Richard Nixon, two years after he resigned the Presidency in disgrace.

During a press conference in August 1989, only a week before he died, Giamatti was asked whether Rose should be inducted into the Hall of Fame. The matter was for the Baseball Writers of America, he said, not for a handful of baseball executives. He would not presume to instruct the writers on the relationship between "life and art."

It is inconceivable that, had he lived, Giamatti would have countenanced the decision of the Hall of Fame voting committee in February to deny the baseball writers their right to vote on Rose's induction. (Though the commissioner has no official power over the committee, his influence is considerable.) Giamatti had a very high regard for sportswriters, partly because he had tried to be one himself. To deny them the right to vote would be to deny them their one act of history.

No wonder the Baseball Writers of America are meeting this morning in Toronto in a state of revolt against the baseball establishment. For once, they had a difficult and important ethical question to ponder: would the great museum of baseball be cheapened by Rose's presence? Or would Cooperstown be trivialized by his absence?

You cannot honor Pete Rose, but you cannot ignore him either. You cannot treat him as a pariah, as base-

A career
that embraced
'life and art,'
Giamatti said.

ball is now doing, without serious consequences. Baseball is hounding Rose in his private life, denying him the right to celebrate past glories with his former teammates, blocking him from the broadcast booth, stripping him, in its most petty act, of the chance to put on a 1927 Detroit Tigers uniform for a bit part in a movie.

You cannot do that without creating tremendous sympathy for Rose. He's being turned into a victim of a Biblical curse that goes way beyond the appropriate punishment for his baseball crime — gambling. From his mythic heroes, Giamatti would have known better.

There is a solution to this thorny question. If Cooperstown represents the history of baseball, how can it overlook the game's all-time hit leader and the game's all-time tragic figure?

Put Rose in the museum wing at Cooperstown, but not in the traditional Hall of Heroes, where the other star players are remembered with bronze plaques. Fashion a permanent exhibit about the great moments of his great career, including crashing into Ray Fosse at home plate in the 1970 All-Star game, the best ever played. And let the exhibit portray the fall of Pete Rose, too.

Museums are supposed to educate as well as entertain. The Pete Rose exhibit could explain why gambling is baseball's capital crime. Let it teach why Pete Rose's actions struck at the integrity and authenticity of the game. Let it show why Giamatti was so passionate, almost operatic, about this form of cheating.

Such an exhibit would be true to the real legacy of Pete Rose, and the final triumph of Giamatti as a teacher.

James Reston Jr. is author of "Collision at Home Plate: The Lives of Pete Rose and Bart Giamatti."

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