

Goose cooked with high heat

by Tim Sullivan

Rich Gossage was a pitcher by profession and a gunslinger by disposition.

The Goose was malice aforethought with a bushy mustache, a merciless scowl and a ferocious fastball, a stylistic throwback to a baseball era when hitters crowded the plate at their own peril.

"He didn't want to pitch around you," Jerry Coleman said Tuesday. "He wanted to throw the ball right through home plate and through you. He was that kind of guy. He's the only guy who picked up Joan Kroc and threw her in the pool. Who else would do that? Steve Garvey wouldn't do that."

The newest member of Baseball's Hall of Fame achieved his long-delayed immortality Tuesday because of an intimidating blend of velocity and bravado, and despite drenching his team's owner while the Padres celebrated their first pennant.

If Rollie Fingers was statistically superior, and Bruce Sutter more baffling, no closer has handled baseball's most stressful job with more menace or less apprehension than the man who was on the mound when the Padres qualified for their first World Series in 1984.

A lot of guys have enough arm to pitch in the ninth inning for significant stakes, but not all of them have the aptitude. Rich Gossage welcomed pitching under pressure, thrived on it, really. He craved challenges that would have caused some of his contemporaries to crawl under a tarpaulin to seek cover.

"I was brought into situations God couldn't get out of," he likes to say, "and I got out of them."

Gossage didn't always prevail - see Brett, George and Gibson, Kirk - but he always expected to be on the mound when it mattered most. Sometimes, as was the fashion in those days, for two or three innings.

"Please don't compare me to these modern-day relievers," Gossage said Tuesday, in reference to Trevor Hoffman and Mariano Rivera. "It's apples and oranges. It's not the same game."

What Gossage did then is now the job of three pitchers. Four times, Gossage saved at least 25 games while throwing 100 or more innings - a feat no active pitcher has accomplished even once.

"He was fearless," Tony Gwynn said Tuesday after a luncheon at the Hall of Champions in San Diego. "And he could be fearless from the seventh inning on ...

"There was nobody he thought he couldn't get out. There was no situation he didn't think he could get out of. And he wanted the ball. And he wanted the ball every day."

In 1981, Gossage made eight postseason appearances for the Yankees and allowed no earned runs across 14 1/3 innings. Having blown the Saturday night save that necessitated Garvey's epic home run in Game 4 of the 1984 National League Championship Series, Gossage returned Sunday afternoon to throw 33 more pitches to close out the Cubs.

"The jams that I came into were always so exciting," he said Tuesday. "I felt the more difficult the situation, the better I was."

The Goose was slightly past his peak during his four seasons with the Padres (1984-87), but if he didn't scare you at least a little bit, you probably weren't paying enough attention. To this day, Gossage's 1981 World Series beaming of Ron Cey remains one of the most cringe-worthy film clips in baseball's archives.

And Gossage remains about as remorseless as if he had squashed a bug beneath his boot.

"Hitting in a game (today) is no different than hitting in a home run contest," he complained in 2006. "It (ticks) me off to say Barry Bonds is the greatest hitter. He's playing in a wussy era. The game is soft. You never get thrown at today."

Though Gossage plunked only 47 hitters in 1,002 major league games, he used other forms of intimidation. He would sometimes scream at hitters just for stepping out of the batter's box, and his willingness to go up and in at 98 miles per hour proved a good predictor of hitters' fortitude.

Rickey Henderson, whose batting stance was itself an act of defiance, logged nine career at-bats against Gossage and (according to baseball-reference.com) struck out nine times.

Gossage was less dominant against Carl Yastrzemski (12-for-32, .375), but Yaz proved the foil for the

defining confrontation of his career. On Oct. 2, 1978, in the one-game playoff that made Bucky Dent famous, Gossage was summoned with one out in the seventh inning to finish the Boston Red Sox.

Clinging to a one-run lead with two out and two on in the bottom of the ninth, Gossage felt his legs shaking, "like I was being led in front of a firing squad."

He tried to calm himself by recalling that his worst-case scenario would be going home to Colorado and looking at the mountains. Then he fired "one of the hardest pitches I've ever thrown," a pitch so swift it surprised the seasoned Yastrzemski and produced the game-ending popup caught by third baseman Graig Nettles.

Tuesday, Gossage called that the biggest game of his career. He called election to the Hall of Fame "like being hit with a brick."

Given the choice, some batters would have preferred to be hit with a brick than by a Goose Gossage fastball.

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