

Gossage still waiting for Hall of Fame call

by Bill Center

Goose Gossage went into the hall of fame the other night.

Just not "the" Hall of Fame.

Gossage, former Chargers defensive end Gary "Big Hands" Johnson and former Padres President Emil "Buzzie" Bavasi were inducted into San Diego's Hall of Champions during the annual Champions Dinner.

"I'm honored," Gossage said via telephone from his Colorado home days before the ceremony.

"But I'd like to think it's just a start," the former Padres relief pitcher said. "I'm still waiting for that other hall to call."

That would be Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Gossage missed entry into baseball's shrine by 3.8 percent of the vote this year in the balloting that elected another former Padres great - Tony Gwynn - and Cal Ripken Jr.

"I was excited and at the same time disappointed," Gossage said of the Hall of Fame vote.

"The writers voting tell me it's going to happen. Most of them thought it would happen this year. But it's tough to come so close and fall short.

Twenty-one votes short among the 545 cast.

"Maybe one hall of fame a year," joked Gossage.

Gossage, 55, was honored for the four seasons he spent with the Padres from 1984 to 1987.

During that span, Gossage won 25 games and saved 83 others. Twice he represented the Padres in the All-Star Game. And he was the closer on the 1984 team that presented San Diego with its first National League pennant.

But Gossage was more than a star player for the Padres. He was a presence.

COOPERSTOWN NEXT? - Goose Gossage was nearing 36 but was still bringing the heat to the San Diego Padres in 1987. He was recently inducted into the San Diego Hall of Champions. CNS Photo by Jim Baird. "Goose gave us feist, if that's a correct word," Gwynn once said. "He was an hombre and everyone in baseball knew it. You didn't mess with Goose. You watched what he did and followed his lead."

In many ways, the years haven't mellowed Rich Gossage.

While he says he admires Trevor Hoffman, Gossage can't hide his belief that modern closers are not the pitchers they were in his day.

"Now you have middle relievers, setup men and one-inning specialists to finish the game off," said Gossage. "Getting those last three outs is still the toughest job in the game.

"But back then, we were our own setup men. Guys like Rollie (Fingers), Mike Marshall, Sparky Lyle, Dan Quisenberry and myself were our own setup men. I worked the seventh and the eighth as well as the ninth.

"I'll tell you one thing, to sit in the dugout after getting out of an eighth-inning jam waiting for the ninth is apples and oranges from coming in from the bullpen to start the ninth fresh. I think the setup guy often faces a tougher situation than the closer.

"I wish I could have been part of the one-inning generation. I don't know if I'd ever have given up a hit.

"The workload was tremendous back then. It was grueling. I pitched six days in a row once and worked more than an inning about half those days. I was a workhorse.

"And I loved it. I never complained. But after I did something like that, I was lost to the team for a couple of days. So maybe the new way is right."

Gossage said he saw the "total evolution" of relief pitching during his 22-season major league career.

"When I broke in, the bullpen was a total junk pile of old starters and kids right out of the minors," said Gossage. "That's how I got my start in the major leagues. Then I was a starting pitcher for a season before they started going for bullpen specialists. By the time I was finished, the one-inning guys were upon us."

Gossage remembers his four seasons with the Padres as a "roller-coaster ride."

Gossage was the last free agent signed by Ray Kroc before the beloved Padres owner died in 1984. Toward the end of his stay in San Diego, Gossage was suspended by the Padres after his angry response to a ban of beer in the clubhouse.

Gossage's remembers his words in response to the ban approved by Kroc's widow and team owner Joan Kroc were: "We can't have beer, and they're poisoning the world with their cheeseburgers."

"It just came out," said Gossage. "What people don't remember is that I had a great relationship with the Krocs. I remember visiting Ray in the hospital just before he died. Joan was a great lady. Knowing her was a great experience."

With that, Gossage solved one of the great mysteries in Padres history - how Joan Kroc wound up in the swimming pool at Gossage's house the night the Padres clinched the National League West title in 1984.

"We played in the afternoon and the team went to my place to see the Dodgers game," said Gossage. "When the Dodgers lost, we won the title. We went wild. Everyone was jumping in the pool. (Steve) Garvey came in from another engagement in a tux and jumped in."

"I looked up and saw Joan. She had also just come from a formal dinner and was dressed to the nines. A lot of people think she jumped in. But what happened is she reached down to shake my hand. She should have known me better than that. I yanked her into the pool.

"Honestly, the 1984 season was one of the greatest experiences of my career. To be part of that team at that time.

"It was special turning on a city for the first time like that."

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