

Hoffman turns Wall Street closer, White House diner

by Tom Krasovic

Trevor Hoffman wins honors for the San Diego Padre who had the most fun on his winter vacation.

In January, Hoffman stood at the center of the capitalist universe, rang the closing bell and banged a gavel to the frenzied cheers of Wall Street traders.

About a week later at the White House, Hoffman sat across the dinner table from President Bush and the first lady and glimpsed the Washington Monument through a nearby window.

TREVOR HOFFMAN - Trevor Hoffman, working out at spring training, had an offseason to remember. CNS Photo by K.C. Alfred.

"It was just pretty amazing," Hoffman said. "You get some special perks from being a big-league ballplayer."

Inspired by American League center fielder Johnny Damon's ceremonial appearance on Wall Street, Hoffman had asked a well-connected financial adviser to find out if he could land the closing gig at the New York Stock Exchange as well. Wall Street responded favorably, in part, the Padres' closer surmised, because Hoffman had become the majors' all-time saves leader in September.

The White House invitation came from syndicated Beltway columnist George Will, a former Padres' board member who rounds up ballplayers every winter for a visit with President Bush.

One vivid memory Hoffman has of Wall Street was walking the trading floor. He required no introduction to many of the traders, who, as it turned out, had excellent recall of Hoffman's unsuccessful encounters with the New York Yankees in the 1998 World Series, former Mets' slugger Mike Piazza and the American League All-Stars.

"It was a little like the locker room," Hoffman said. "There were some Yankees' and Mets' fans and they told me about some of my performances ... and about the All-Star Game." Hoffman didn't mind pointing out that his blown save in the All-Star Game last July had no real lasting effect, because the National League champion Cardinals, although deprived of home-field advantage by the NL's loss in the All-Star outcome, still prevailed in five games over Detroit.

Moving across the trading floor toward the podium, Hoffman might as well have been approaching the mound.

"I kept my head down and kept walking," he said.

One difference was that Hoffman was ringing a bell, not entering to the sound of bells. And it wasn't quite as simple as ringing a bell. A button had to be depressed for 15 seconds at the right time before Hoffman was to bang it. Some guests have goofed and been roundly booed for it. The man who has converted 90.2 percent of his career save chances admitted to some jitters, then deftly closed a fairly giddy trading day that nearly set a record high for the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

"I did OK," Hoffman said. "I didn't screw up. It was a neat experience for me."

Hoffman also was a man of few words when he and his baseball colleagues visited the president. The baseball contingent included Hoffman's wife, Tracy, Cubs' manager Lou Piniella, broadcaster Tim McCarver, Mets' third baseman David Wright and Blue Jays' center fielder Vernon Wells. During dinner, Hoffman defended pitchers in a conversation that had tilted toward the hitters, but mostly, he absorbed the proceedings.

"I kept my mouth shut for a while," Hoffman said.

The group repaired to the Oval Office for a tour conducted by President Bush. Particularly memorable to Hoffman was the president's comment that Abraham Lincoln was "the greatest president we ever had."

Hoffman's offseason wasn't entirely a moveable feast. While golfing with fellow ballplayers in Mexico, he got the word in November that he had finished second in balloting for the NL Cy Young Award. Padres' pitching coach Darren Balsley, among others on the team, had said without equivocation that Hoffman deserved the award, which went to Arizona Diamondbacks' starter Brandon Webb.

"I would have loved to have been able to win the award, but it's out of my control," Hoffman said.

Hoffman was more disappointed about not winning in 1998, when he converted 53 of 54 save chances and compiled a 1.48 ERA for a first-place team that won 98 games. Then he was so miffed that he sought out voters who had omitted him from the three-deep ballot.

In October, Hoffman wasn't clearing any trophy space in his Del Mar, Calif., home, even after bagging an NL-best 46 saves and compiling a 2.14 ERA for another Padres' club that won its division.

"You kind of try to not set yourself up for a fall," he said. "I prepared myself for some of the disappointment I would feel."

Believing that it is disadvantageous to let his opponents see him sweat, Hoffman controls his body language even when things go against him on the ballfield. When he got word that he had finished second for the Cy, he

shielded any disappointment from his baseball brethren.

"You have to be careful in how you react and how you handle some disappointing news," he said.

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