



from the editor

E. Garry Hill

AN OPEN LETTER to the USATF president, Bill Roe, and the CEO, Craig Masback.

Dear Bill & Craig—You signed the letter that came to me some weeks back with the ballot for this year’s class of the Hall Of Fame. My response is simple: thanks, but no thanks. Once again I’ll avail myself of the opportunity not to vote (anybody miss me yet?), for the simple reason that the whole HOF procedure is so goofy I use my non-participation as a form of protest. And as a hope that you can upgrade the HOF process, as you have done with so many other parts of the organization.

It’s time for me to be mean to the Hall Of Fame again

I also hope that when the new Hall Of Fame opens at the Armory next year the mechanism for installing people is something to be proud of, not head-scratched over.

I realize that as heads of a volunteer organization set up along democratic lines you’re very much at the mercy of your constituents. But if ever there was something that could use a little less democracy, it’s the HOF process. As I headlined a previous rant on this subject back in the March

’96 issue, “Democracy Has No Place In Hall Of Fame Voting.”

The problem starts early in the process. There are those in your organization who are proud that “anyone can make a nomination.” That’s a weakness, not a strength. So is the fact that just about everyone has a vote. That last is hyperbole, of course, but the voting rolls are bloated with a preponderance of people who may never have heard of all of each year’s nominees, let alone be able to make a cogent decision on how to separate them.

The most senior nominee on the ’02 ballot was born some 125 years ago and died more than 60 years ago. How many association presidents, standing sports committee members and reigning national champions—just to name a few categories of iffy voters—do you think know enough history to vote properly? Do you think it a coincidence that of this year’s 11 nominees the 4 who got in were from among the 5 youngest?

At this point I’d like to clarify that I have no particular gripes with this year’s elected quartet—Earl Bell, Steve Scott, Gwen Torrence and Larry Young. All have legitimate claims to be in the Hall, although in my not-so-humble opinion their elections came at the expense of even more qualified candidates who weren’t even among the nominees. And the nomination of some of the others was definitely questionable.

Of course I’m cognizant of the fact that USATF inherited a flawed product. When the first track HOF was established independently in West Virginia in the early ’70s we all had high hopes and many of the sport’s best minds were in on the ground floor. But somehow the process went awry early on, with an old-boys-club hijacking the process. Robert Simpson was installed the first year and Bob Hayes (see p. 49) had to wait until the third?! But I digress.

I was particularly turned off to the HOF by two other developments this year. One was somebody suggesting I support a nomination because athlete X was dying and it would be a nice present. The other was a concerted effort by supporters of one nominee to gain election through a blitz of mail supporting the candidacy. This isn’t supposed to be a popularity contest.

Which leads me to my final gripe. The way the HOF biographies are written, you’d think they were obituaries. They’re supposed to be well-reasoned lists of qualifications, unencumbered with sentimentalism and irrelevancies that serve only to distract from the task at hand.

Having polio as a child isn’t a viable HOF credential. Nor should voters care about whether or not an athlete-nominee had a decent coaching career. (If you were neither good enough coach nor athlete can you get into the HOF by being mediocre at both, based on some warped combination of cosmic karma?) Should somebody be nominated even though their only Olympic medal was won representing another country? Does having kids who performed well count? How about being a New York City policeman? All these “credentials” were a part of this year’s ballot.

Again, my congratulations to those who got in—and my condolences to those not-nominated-but-deserving ones left waiting in the wings, perhaps with little hope of ever getting recognized, through no fault of their own.

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