The Best Day

Perhaps "good things come to those who wait," but this was getting ridiculous. Jim Bunning was convinced he would never make it to baseball's Hall of Fame.

He was accustomed to elections. But not this kind of election. Run for political office and you need only a majority of the votes to win, maybe even less if more than two are in the race. In baseball's annual Hall of Fame balloting, the magic number is 75 percent. No exceptions. No rounding off percentages. Fail to get three-quarters of the votes and it's wait 'til next year. Jim Bunning got fed up with waiting.

In politics, you wage a campaign, you cast your vote on election day, and then you wait, eyes glued to a television set, an ear pressed against a telephone as the results roll in. Win, and you give a victory speech to your cheering, adoring supporters; lose, and you deliver a concession speech. Either way, it was your campaign. Your victory. Your defeat. You played the major role in the outcome.

Baseball's Hall of Fame election is different. Ten-year members of the Baseball Writers Association of America do the voting. A player doesn't become eligible until five years after his last hurrah. Most Hall of Famers are forced to wait much longer than that. Despite being honored as baseball's "outstanding living player," Joe DiMaggio didn't become a Hall of Famer until his third year on the ballot. Juan Marichal, one of the premier pitchers of his era, also had to

wait until his third year. Eddie Collins made it in his fourth year, Eddie Mathews his fifth. Mickey Cochrane needed six years, Joe Medwick seven, Joe Cronin ten, and Ralph Kiner fifteen.

Jim Bunning almost made it in his twelfth year of eligibility, falling four votes short (for 74.2 percent of the votes cast). Nine writers turned in blank ballots, in effect voting against everybody. Had they simply failed to return signed ballots Bunning would have made it, which only heightened his disappointment and made him more certain than ever that he should have insisted his name be removed from consideration years before.

Bunning never could understand why the support a man got varied so greatly from one year to another. His record didn't change from his first year of eligibility to his fifth, or tenth, or fifteenth. Why should he get 20 percent of the votes one year, 50 percent another year, and 74.2 percent another year?

When he didn't come close in 1976, his first year on the ballot, Jim asked to have his name removed from future consideration.

"Do me a favor," he said over the phone. "Get me off the ballot. I don't want to go through this for fifteen years."

"But you might make it some day," I told him. "A lot of people don't vote for somebody the first year, or the second year. Later on, though, they do."

"Why should I get more votes ten or fifteen years from now?" Bunning replied. "I'm not going to win any more games."

It isn't easy to argue with Jim Bunning under any circumstances, and he clearly had common sense on his side this time. Fortunately, he finally gave in (very reluctantly) and allowed his name to remain on the ballot. Several times in the years that followed Jim regretted that decision and made it a point to say so. "I shouldn't have listened to you," he would say.

Bunning received 143 votes his first year, 187 his second year, and 147 (34 percent) his third year. If the increased support in his second year had been encouraging, what happened in the third year was a terrible letdown.

"I'm not going to worry about that damn thing," Jim said. "I've seen too many guys eat their hearts out worrying about getting in the Hall of Fame. I'm not angry. Aggravated is more the correct word. My family is hyper about it. I'm not. I'm not going to campaign . . . I feel I've accomplished certain things in my career. What I did in baseball

they can't take away. The fun I had playing the game, the money I earned, the accomplishments—no matter if I'm never voted to anything, they still can't take that away."

That was the second time Bunning asked to have his name removed from the ballot, and the second time he was talked out of it.

By 1984, his eighth year of eligibility, Bunning's vote total was climbing again . . . even if it wasn't climbing enough. It jumped again in 1985, which led many to believe that 1986 would be the magic year. Jim, of course, had doubts, although the sudden interest of the television networks made him wonder if they knew something he didn't know.

Jim and Mary Bunning were driving to their Fort Thomas home from Florida when word got to them that NBC and CBS were trying to contact him. So Bunning called.

"We want you to come on the *Today* show Thursday morning," the person from NBC informed him.

"We want you on the *CBS Morning News*, the voice over the phone from CBS said.

"Why?" Bunning asked each time.

Twice the answer came back loud and clear.

"We've been informed there's a very good chance you'll make the Hall of Fame," they told him.

He was to fly to New York after the vote was announced Wednesday night. There would be a limo to pick him up at his midtown hotel at 6:30 A.M. It sounded, for all the world, as if the two networks had been tipped off. One problem. The votes wouldn't even be counted until Wednesday evening. The networks were lining him up—together, no doubt, with such other hot Hall of Fame prospects as Willie McCovey, Billy Williams, and Catfish Hunter—just in case.

It's a cruel way to do things.

Bunning found out while eating dinner shortly before 10 P.M. that he had failed to get the necessary 75 percent, missing by forty votes. At 11:30 the networks called back.

"They told me, 'Forget it,'" Bunning recalled. "You know how the girl [from one of the networks] put it? She said, 'Maybe the next time.' I said, 'Fine.' You know what I wanted to tell her?"

A year later came another big buildup to a letdown. As the day drew near his phone kept ringing. Sportswriters and sportscasters from around the country wanted to know where he would be on the night

of decision. They all made it clear they thought he had an excellent chance to make up the forty votes he lacked in 1986. Bob Lemon, a twenty-game winner seven times, had made it in his twelfth year of eligibility; maybe Jim would make it a year sooner.

Excitement grew. Get enough phone calls, have enough people build up your hopes, and, despite all those years of disappointment, it's hard not to catch the fever.

And then, two nights before the results were to be announced, Jim's mother suffered three strokes and went into a coma. Suddenly, Cooperstown didn't seem all that important.

It seemed plenty important to the television crews and the reporters who showed up at the Bunnings' home on Hall of Fame election night, however. There Jim and Mary sat, together with the media types, making small talk, waiting for the happy news from New York. Only there was no happy news. This time Jim had missed by twenty-one votes. The camera crews and the newspaper reporters tiptoed out.

Not surprisingly, Jim and Mary Bunning got as far away as they could on the night the votes were counted in 1988. Waiting for a congratulatory phone call that never came, while a mob of reporters and would-be well-wishers sat in your living room, got to be downright embarrassing.

So the Bunnings solved the problem by going to Maui for a short vacation, telling only a few close friends where they could be contacted. It turned out to be a good move. This was the year of the blank ballots, the year Jim lost by four votes and eight-tenths of a percentage point. Needing 321 of the 427 votes cast, he got 317. Although Bunning had three more years on the writers' ballot, he never came close again.

The 1988 failure was the hardest to take. Athletes are geared to make things happen, not to wait for somebody else to make them happen. That's what makes baseball's Hall of Fame election so difficult for many of them to endure.

Jim Bunning couldn't pick up a baseball and try to get his 2,856th strikeout or his 225th victory. For a man of action, the waiting, accompanied by a feeling of helplessness, is a darn sight rougher than facing Ted Williams with two out in the ninth inning at Fenway Park and a no-hitter on the line. Or throwing a 2-2 curve ball to the Mets' John Stephenson with two out in the ninth inning at Shea Stadium and a perfect game hanging in the balance. On those occasions success or failure was in Bunning's hands, not in the hands of several hundred

baseball writers with varied opinions and prejudices and levels of knowledge.

This election night was a far cry from the ones Congressman Bunning had grown accustomed to in his political life. No reports from outlying areas. No network projections. No sense of how things were going. Just waiting. And waiting. And then, nothing.

I had the unpleasant duty of calling Jim in Maui with the results.

"Sorry, you missed by four votes. Yeah, four votes."

"I think I was right the first time," he said. "If you don't make it right away you should take your name off the ballot so you won't have to go through this bull every year."

In the end, though, all that he and Mary went through on those Hall of Fame election nights made his eventual 1996 election by the Veterans Committee that much sweeter. In a way it meant more, too, Bunning would say later, because the men on that committee were his contemporaries. They had seen him pitch; in some cases they had hit against him. They knew firsthand what he could do, how fine a pitcher and how tough a competitor he was.

The Veterans Committee included former major league general managers Joe L. Brown, Buzzie Bavasi, and Hank Peters; former Negro League player/manager/scout Buck O'Neil; former players Ted Williams, Stan Musial, Monte Irvin, Yogi Berra, Pee Wee Reese, and Bill White, the latter recently retired as National League president; the writers Allen Lewis, Bob Broeg, Leonard Koppett, and Edgar Munzel; and the broadcaster Ken Coleman. Under the rules they could elect just one player, who had to get 75 percent of the votes. As it turned out, two players hit the 75 percent mark: Bunning received thirteen of the fifteen votes, Nellie Fox twelve. (Fox was elected a year later.)

So it was that the call came in to Congressman Bunning's Washington office. Jim wasn't even thinking about the Hall of Fame on this day. Not after enduring all those past disappointments.

"I had put it away, put it out of my mind," he said. "I thought I'm not going to make it. Even though I had advocates—people like Allen Lewis [the retired *Philadelphia Inquirer* baseball writer] on the committee, and some of the people I played against—I never thought I could get 75 percent of everybody. I had put it so I would never let it become so big in my life that it would make me upset or get me disturbed. I had done, I think, a pretty good job of putting it away."

And then all of a sudden it happened. Ed Stack, president of the

Hall of Fame, placed the call from the Airport Marriott in Tampa, Florida, where the Veterans Committee meets each March. At the moment the phone rang in Bunning's office, Jim was meeting with delegates from the union that represents the treasury employees at the Internal Revenue Service, not exactly his most rabid boosters. "They said I'd never meet with them, so I said I'm going to meet with them," Jim recalled.

There were fifteen of them in Bunning's private office. The meeting was going hot and heavy—too hot and too heavy to be interrupted by a phone call from Tampa.

"They told me it's the president of the Hall of Fame," Bunning said. "I said, 'Take a message. I'll call him back.' And I didn't pay any attention to it."

All those years Bunning had waited for a phone call that never came. Now it had come and he was too busy to take it. He left Stack hanging on the other end and went on with the meeting. Finally, one of Jim's associates came in and said, "He won't hang up. He's holding."

Stack had held for ten minutes. When Bunning finally took the call, Stack handed the phone to Allen Lewis of the Veterans Committee, the former baseball writer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* whose thorough research and presentation of Bunning's Hall of Fame qualifications played a major role in Jim's election.

"I picked up the phone," Bunning recalled, "and he said, 'Congratulations, you have just been elected to the Hall of Fame by the Veterans Committee.' And I said, 'Tell me one thing now—this is for sure. They can't take it back.'"

Lewis, himself a Hall of Famer in the writers' wing, assured him the deed was done. Twenty-five years after his final season as an active player, Jim Bunning had become a Hall of Famer.

"After waiting so darn long I didn't know how it worked on the Veterans Committee," Bunning said. "I didn't know that if I got one more vote than Nellie Fox, and both of us had enough votes to get in, only one gets in."

Now he knew. In the next few minutes Bill White, an old friend and onetime Phillies teammate, got on the phone to congratulate him. So did a fellow Kentuckian, Pee Wee Reese, the former Dodger shortstop and Hall of Famer. His first at-bat against Bunning came in an exhibition game in Miami; Jim, just a kid at the time, drilled him in the elbow with a pitch. Reese later told Bunning it was the hardest he'd