

Jack Morris awaits one last honor

Eric Butterman

If St. Paul native Jack Morris doesn't make the Hall of Fame on Wednesday, it will be because of one thing: winning a World Series. If only he had called it a career after his 1991 Game 7 gem for the Minnesota Twins and not pitched for the 1992 World Champion Blue Jays, he'd have made it years ago. Of course, many will argue that there's no way they'd so easily have voted in a pitcher who'd have the highest ERA in the Hall of Fame.

Except, if he never pitched beyond '91, then that distinction still would have belonged to Red Ruffing. Morris' ERA would still have been high, but there's never anything so damning as highest.

And it would also have erased the second knock against him — that, even though the Blue Jays won the World Series four games to two, guess who took the two losses? You see, without 1992, Jack Morris retires with a perfect 4-0 record in the Fall Classic.

Now we'll return to 1992 in a second, but, first, let's delve a little deeper into 1991. Morris dismissers are forced to mention his Game 7 shutout, but usually don't go into too much further detail. You'll likely hear many of these same discounters prop up John Smoltz for first-ballot Hall of Fame selection, praising his postseason success. This seems a bit odd when Morris outlasted Smoltz for the 1991 Championship. As you'll recall, young Smoltz was forced to leave Game 7 in the eighth inning after getting into a first-and-third jam; Jack Morris simply pitched on.

Of course, I'm not saying Smoltz doesn't deserve to be in Cooperstown, but you would think praise for Smoltz's playoff prowess would somehow rub off a little more on Morris.

Time to deal with 1992. Another oddity in many Morris assessments is that 20 years ago pitchers didn't seem to have arm problems. I know this because now if a pitcher goes well over 200 innings and deep into the playoffs, many analysts use it as an excuse for a poor performance the next year. "How honorable that he sacrificed himself for a championship!" "He looked at the bigger picture." "What a teammate!" Such analysis didn't seem to exist two decades ago, otherwise they would have noticed that Morris in 1991 pitched 240 regular-season innings, went as deep as you can go in the playoffs and, oh yes, pitched 10 innings in that final start.

To, uh, win the whole thing.

If this happened today, everyone would give Morris a pass, maybe even say they wouldn't be surprised if he was never the same, then elevate him to martyr status.

Because, in fact, Morris never was the same.

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His 1991 ERA, a fairly strong 3.43, never would happen again. Let's focus further on 1992, the season in which Morris was assessed as riding his team's coattails to a championship by so many. I would be the first to admit that his 21 wins had more than a little something to do with offensive backing, but what many haven't noticed — is that the Blue Jays don't win their first World Series that year without him. Forgotten is how the Milwaukee Brewers finished only four games behind them in the American League East — and, in fact, they dealt with the Jays handily in the season series, winning 8 out of 13 games. Still, starting from May 25, Toronto never gave up first place for the rest of the year, at worst being tied.

But they almost did in late August.

Lose three in a row to the surprise Brewers and there would be a new team out in front in the division for the first time in three months, the kind of devastating loss of invincibility that ruined many a season. Toronto got killed in two of those contests, giving up 22 runs and seven runs, respectively. But Morris won the other — by allowing a solitary run in seven innings.

That's not riding coattails, that's raining on a Brewer parade.

But the end of the season would be Morris' greatest contribution, letting the Blue Jays take 53 innings from him in a 31-day period. His worst start of these final six outings was his last, likely running on fumes. He gave up runs — absolutely — four earned in six innings, but helped his team hang on for an 8-7 win. If they had lost, their lead would have been cut to just one game with only two to play. If you don't think fear hung in the minds of Jays fans that day, consider how, just a few years before, Morris' Tigers took the division from Toronto despite needing to sweep them in the season-ending series to do it.

With that final triumphphant, if not stellar outing, what little was left of Jack Morris was given on October 2, 1992.

That much seems obvious.

From his inferior 6.57-ERA performance that followed in the ALCS against Oakland.

To his abominable 8.44

ERA in the World Series — never had he ever pitched so poorly on such a stage. In fact, when the 1992 playoffs were concluded, his lifetime postseason ERA had ballooned by more than two-thirds of a run.

So, if only he hadn't won three titles.

If only he had settled for two.

Then Morris' lifetime postseason numbers would be a sterling 7-1 record with a 2.60 ERA — and his final game would have been 10 innings of nothing short of legend.

But that's just not how it went. And nothing can change that.

For playing on, if Morris doesn't get in the Hall, it likely will be one of his saddest moments. A moment of "what if ... ?" A moment of little consolation.

Unless, of course, you count a nation.

The country that saw its Montreal Expos go to the capital of their neighbors to the south. The country that maybe, just maybe, wouldn't even have one team if not for the first time it went all the way, after the Blue Jay postseason disappointments of '85, '89 and '91. Yes, they won a second championship, but that's a breeze compared to getting a monkey off your back.

Just ask the Red Sox, who took 86 years between titles and then suddenly did an encore just three years later.

If this was his sacrifice, there may be some that wish Cooperstown resided in Canada, so they could all easily come and tell of how a mustached Morris gave every last bit of tendon and defined the mound.

But if you're still not convinced, if you still believe that January 9, 2013, will be a day of travesty should his name be called, if you still insist that Morris shouldn't get any credit for Toronto's first title, that it's what you do in those winning Fall Classics that should follow you forever, don't dare look at the statistics of one John Smoltz as closely as Morris.

For if you do, you'll notice his ERA for the only World Series his team ever took.

15.43.

Jack Morris is a Hall of Famer.

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