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Lion Who Made Players Roar Faces the Quiet

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Marvin Miller transformed major league baseball players from sheep into lions.

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When Miller became the first executive director of the players association in 1966, his major task was not battling owners but persuading players to change their thinking.

“The biggest problem in the beginning was the low self-esteem of the players,” Miller said Tuesday. “They had been so beaten down that they didn’t really understand their value in the game.”

Under Miller’s direction, the players association became one of the strongest unions in the nation.

For Miller, battling baseball owners has proven a lot easier than reaching the National Baseball Hall of Fame. After failing to win election in 2003 and rejections in 2007 by two veterans committee panels, Miller, who turned 91 last month, said he no longer wanted to be considered.

In a letter to the Baseball Writers’ Association of America, Miller wrote:

“Paradoxically, I’m writing to thank you and your associates for your part in nominating me for Hall of Fame consideration, and, at the same time, to ask that you not do this again.”

Miller added: “The antiunion bias of the powers who control the hall has consistently prevented recognition of the historic significance of the changes to baseball brought about by collective bargaining. As former executive director (retired since 1983) of the players’ union that negotiated these changes, I find myself unwilling to contemplate one more rigged veterans committee whose members are handpicked to reach a particular outcome while offering the pretense of a democratic vote. It is an insult to baseball fans, historians, sports writers and especially to those baseball players who sacrificed and brought the game into the 21st century. At the age of 91, I can do without farce.”

Miller said he planned to write a separate letter to the Hall of Fame board asking them to withdraw his name from consideration. “I simply want to make sure that they know how I feel,” he said. “I don’t want to be nominated again. By anybody.”

The source of Miller’s exasperation is the voting mechanism and what he feels are conflicts of interest that stack the deck against any labor executive who spent a career battling management.

Miller was on the veterans committee ballot in 2003, when electors included members of the hall, and was not elected. He was on the ballot again in 2007 and again failed to win election, although his percentage of the vote rose to 63 percent. Later that year, the Hall of Fame disbanded that group and restructured it into smaller committees, including a 12-member group to consider executives.

The revised committee, made up of seven former executives, three writers and two Hall of Fame players, selected its first class last December. Walter O’Malley, Barney Dreyfuss and Bowie Kuhn — all management insiders — were elected.

Miller was not.

“I don’t think it was aimed at me,” Miller said of the revamped committee. “I think it was aimed to get management people in.”

Miller can’t be considered again until 2009.

Will the Hall of Fame honor Miller’s request to not be considered?

“We’re two years away from this process taking place again for executives,” Jeff Idelson, the president of the hall, said. “It’s a bridge we’ll cross in time.”

It’s easy to understand why a panel made up of people from the establishment may hold a grudge against a man whose existence was spent freeing players to pursue greener pastures. During Miller’s tenure, players won the right to hire agents to negotiate their salaries and to bring grievances before an impartial arbitrator. He won concessions that allowed some veterans to veto proposed trades, and established a system of salary arbitration available to all but the least senior players. The players’ average salary rose from an estimated \$19,000 in 1967 to \$241,497 when Miller retired in 1982.

“It’s really a stretch to ask management people to put me in the Hall of Fame,” Miller said. “Not just that I’m not a player. My job was to be an adversary, not an ally.”

Miller needed 9 of the 12 votes. He received three.

Idelson said he understood Miller’s disappointment. “Marvin has always been very proud and very emotional,” Idelson said. “And I have no doubt it hurt him that he wasn’t elected, but again, he’s eligible in perpetuity. Just because he wasn’t elected doesn’t mean he can’t be in the future.”

The gains players made under Miller’s leadership raise a critical point: why haven’t current players, who owe their multimillion-dollar contracts to Miller, been more vocal in advocating Miller’s place in the hall? The lack of support is a lingering vestige of the timidity Miller encountered in 1966. The players’ reluctance to rock the boat has stiffened with the rise of compensation.

“They don’t understand that not only are they the game, but even more so, they are the Hall of Fame,” Miller said.

Marvin Miller no longer wants to pursue his election to the Hall of Fame. With all due respect, this issue is larger than the individual. One day, fair-minded voters must find Miller his proper place in Cooperstown.

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