Making Bernie's Case For a Cooperstown Plaque

By JAY JAFFE

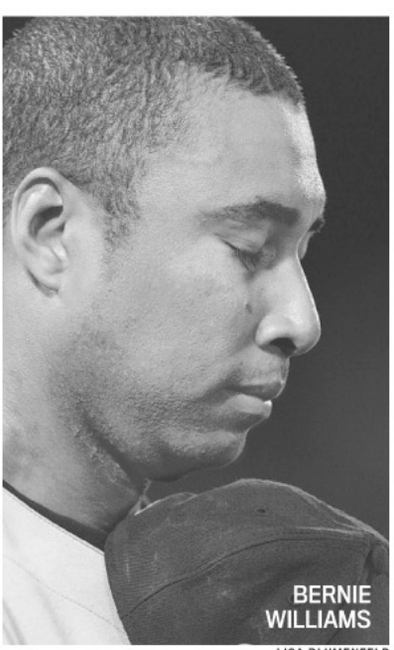
With a lineup featuring eight current or former All-Stars, the Yankees' offense is again worthy of the Bronx Bomber moniker. The Yanks have scored 6.10 runs/game, just off the pace for 1,000 on the season, a level reached only once since 1950 (by the 1999 Cleveland Indians).

Among that heralded crew, however, the offense harbors a weak link. Bernie Williams, now in the fourth year of a protracted decline, is hitting just .217 AVG/.262 OBA/.283 SLG, numbers unacceptable even for a light-hitting backup infielder. Displaced as the everyday centerfielder by the expiration of his seven-year contract and the signing of Johnny Damon, Williams was nonetheless resigned to a sentimentality driven $2 million deal that miscast him as a designated hitter and occasional outfielder.

Williams's name will forever be connected to the Joe Torre dynasty, which has amassed four World Championships, six pennants, and nine division titles. The Yankees will almost certainly retire his number 51 to the leftfield wall near Monument Park when the time comes, and a higher honor may await him: election to Baseball's Hall of Fame. Williams doesn't have an airtight case, but Cooperstown is hardly out of the question.

On the surface, Williams's five All-Star appearances, four Gold Gloves, and lack of an MVP award (his highest finish in the voting was seventh in 1998) don't scream Hall of Fame, nor do career totals that will leave him well shy of 3,000 hits (he has 2,231) and 300 homers (276 and holding). By comparison, teammate Gary Sheffield, two months younger than Williams, has nine All-Star appearances and three top three finishes in the MVP voting, plus 453 home runs and the ability to strike fear in the hearts of opposing pitchers even at 37.

In his "Baseball Abstract" series, Bill



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James introduced two methods of objectively evaluating a player's case for the Hall of Fame. One, the Hall of Fame Monitor, measures how likely a player is to be elected by awarding points for various levels of season or career achievement. Hitters score points in 19 categories: three points for each season of 100 or more RBI, 2.5 for each season hitting .300, 10 for topping 400 homers, five for being the regular centerfielder on a World Series team, and so on. One hundred points is considered "a good possibility" for election and 130 "a virtual cinch." Williams, thanks in part to a streak of eight straight .300 seasons, scores an impressive 133.

Another James metric, the Hall of Fame Standards, compares a player's career totals to those of actual Hall of Famers in a similar manner: one point for every 150 hits above 1,500, one for every .005 of batting average above .275, one for every 100 runs over 900, etc. The average Hall of Famer scores 50 points by this measure; Williams scores a respectable 46.4. Considering that some 200 players have been elected to Cooperstown for what they accomplished as major-leaguers (not as Negro Leaguers or managers), that's not too shabby.

Still, James's metrics are somewhat long in the tooth, devised when the Hall's ranks were roughly two-thirds of what they are now. They make no attempt to account for wide fluctuations in scoring during the game's history; hitting .300 in the offense-rich 1930s is considered an equal feat to doing so in the pitcher-dominated 1960s, and Deadball-era homers count the same as those launched by today's juiced-up sluggers.

Baseball Prospectus has created several tools to better assess a player's value and, ultimately, his case for Cooperstown. A statistic called Wins Above Replacement Player (WARP) measures a player's offensive, defensive, and pitching contributions above what a freely available minor-leaguer or bench player could produce. It then adjusts for park and league scoring levels to put everyone on the same level, and expresses their overall value in wins. A 10.0 WARP season generally merits consideration for MVP, and a career total of 113.0 is enough to crack the all-time top 100. Williams's 98.1 WARP ranks 167th.

But relying solely on career totals can be misleading, as the middle ground between the top 100 and the "100 WARP Club" is swollen with dozens of good but not great players like Willie Randolph (108.8 WARP), who lasted the better part of two decades. Conversely, superstars have made the Hall of Fame by racking up several big seasons amid shorter careers. Hank Greenberg, who was the AL MVP in 1935 and 1490 and socked as many as 58 homers while leading the league four times, accumulated only 85.4 WARP in a war-interrupted career of nine seasons.

A Prospectus system called JAWS (for "Jaffe WARP Score," as self-consciously named by this author) can account for the combination of a player's career and peak accomplishments (defined here as his best seven seasons according to WARP). JAWS is a simple average of those peak and career WARP totals, and a player's score can be compared to those of Hall of Famers at his position to get a clearer sense of his candidacy.

By this method — which leaves aside postseason accomplishments such as Williams's record 22 homers — Bernie doesn't measure up to the average Hall of Fame center fielder's career or peak WARP levels, though his JAWS total is better than 10 of those 17 players. Owing to the fact that he stopped being a productive player after 2002, his candidacy doesn't top those of contemporaries Ken Griffey, Jr. and Jim Edmonds, either.

By this sabermetric reckoning, Williams is no Hall of Famer, but hope for him isn't lost. Even assuming he can't resurrect his career, his presence at the center of four championship teams, playing the most hallowed position for the most storied team in the country's largest market, and doing so with an admirable combination of consistency and quiet dignity in an age when controversy rules the day, assures that he'll get a fair shake when his name appears on the ballot.

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