

“Should Pete Rose Be in the Hall of Fame? Yes”

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Pete Rose finished his storied career with a lifetime batting average of over .300, with a record-setting 4,256 hits in a record-setting 3,562 games. He was named MVP of the World Series, helping the Cincinnati Reds to victory in 1975, and he was the regular-season MVP in 1973. He led the National League in batting three times, and boasted a 44-game hitting streak in 1978. His nickname, “Charlie Hustle,” reflects his enthusiasm and work ethic as a player, for which he was universally acclaimed.

Rose’s achievements are those of a Hall of Fame player. His inclusion in that august company should be, to use a technical term, a no-brainer. Yet he is ineligible even to be considered for inclusion, thanks to discipline meted out by then-Commissioner Bart Giamatti. Unless the ruling is rescinded, Rose will remain out of the Hall of Fame. But the question is, *should* Rose be in the Hall of Fame? The answer is an unequivocal “yes.” Given his impressive record, the burden of proof ought to be on those who claim he should *not* be in the Hall of Fame. They advance precisely one argument: Rose bet on sports. He even bet on baseball. While he was a manager, he may even have bet on his own team. This, we are told, is a disgrace of such epic proportions that he should forever be banned from having his excellence recognized.

Let’s grant for the sake of argument that he bet on baseball, that he bet on the Reds—exactly what is the moral wrong here? If Rose had bet *against* the Reds, and then managed below his ability to “throw” the game, that would be a clear moral wrong: it would constitute a fraud on the spectators, a breach of trust with his employer, and a betrayal of his players. It would demonstrate a venality and lack of integrity so severe that one could make a case it would militate against his other achievements. But—there are no such allegations. The charges seem to amount to his having bet on the Reds *winning*. That, if true, would commit none of the moral wrongs just mentioned. It’s as if he were saying, “I am so confident that my team and I can win, I’ll even put money on it.” This entails no conflict of interest, since he would thereby only incur further reason to manage to the best of his ability, which is what we would normally expect anyway.

If anything, betting on baseball might be evidence of a character flaw. For example, it might mean Rose likes gambling too much, is too “addicted” to the excitement.¹ Maybe it means he was not content with his salary and was seeking an additional revenue source. Maybe he felt “entitled” to make extra money off his spectacular abilities. Maybe he got a thrill out of skirting the rules and engaging in forbidden activity. Any of these would count as some sort of moral failing, albeit not a terrible one.

But the Hall of Fame is not the “Hall of Moral Excellence”—it is designed to honor excellence in baseball. Literally dozens of Hall of Fame members were guilty of character flaws far more severe: racism, most notably. Despising or looking down on members of other races just because they are members of other races is an ignorance and vicious sort of tribalism, surely a moral failing; specifically, failing to regard others as equally worthy of respect or dignity, failing to treat them as individuals. Some were anti-Semitic; some were homophobic. Other members of the Hall of Fame were adulterers, others were alcoholics or users of illegal drugs. At least one was an abusive spouse. Some were surely non-baseball gamblers. Some even cheated at baseball, using illegally doctored bats or balls from time to time. The Hall of Fame makes room for all these morally flawed individuals on the grounds that, vices aside, they exhibited true excellence in their field. The Hall’s slogan is “Preserving History. Honoring Excellence. Connecting Generations.” It doesn’t say anything about “Demanding Moral Perfection.” If it did, Lou Gehrig

¹ I render “addicted” in scare-quotes because I think we should be wary of the lack of free will it implies. If Rose *literally* lacked free will, surely he should not be held responsible, and thus not held ineligible.

would not have very much company in Cooperstown. Pete Rose's achievements are a part of baseball history, which should be connected to future generations, and his unquestioned excellence as a player deserves to be honored.ⁱ

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