



Legends ≈ By Del Duda

Catching Up With Al Oliver

Nearly a decade has come and gone since Al Oliver struck out on his chance to reach immortality in Cooperstown.

Being inducted into Major League Baseball's Hall of Fame is about the only thing Oliver did not achieve in his 18-year, star-studded career.

Oliver, 53, was a seven-time All Star, played on a World Series Championship team in Pittsburgh in 1971, won the NL batting title in 1982, and retired with a .303 lifetime batting average. Statistically, he was a shoo-in for the Hall of Fame.

Not everyone agreed.

Oliver, who lives in his hometown of Portsmouth, Ohio, became eligible for the Hall in 1991 after a career in which he played for Pittsburgh, Texas, Montreal, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and finally Toronto. However, he never got that phone call informing him of his induction. In fact, he received only 19 votes—less than the 5 percent needed to get back on the ballot for future consideration.

Oliver's lifetime average of .303 (the same as Pete Rose's lifetime mark) was ahead of such players as Willie Mays (.302), Frank Robinson (.294), and Lou Brock (.293). He finished 22nd all-time in doubles with 529 of them—more than Tony Perez, Al Kaline, and Ted Williams. And he drove in more runs (1,326) than Gil Hodges and Roberto Clemente, finishing with just 50 fewer RBI than Johnny Bench.

He batted over .300 for nine consecutive seasons (1976-1984).

"Do I deserve to be in the Hall of Fame?" Oliver says, contemplating the oft-asked question. "I'll leave that for others to debate. But there's no doubt in my mind that I

deserved more than 19 votes."

Bitter words? Not really.

"That's where your upbringing comes into play," he says. "I never got mad—but there were times I was frustrated."

Those frustrations included being platooned in the beginning and twilight years of his career. "I still had 4 or 5 years left in me," he says, adding that he would have passed the 3,000-hit mark by then.

In his last two seasons in the majors, Oliver played in only 101 games. His average dipped to .251 in a reserve role.

That was a far cry from his hey-day with the Pirates and Expos.

During his first few seasons with Pittsburgh, Oliver was platooned in several positions, which did not set well with him, although he finally learned to accept it. He left first base, where he earned the name "Scoop," and went to center field.

"I was labeled by some writers as a complainer and selfish," he says. "How was I selfish when I went from position to position and did what was asked of me?"

He was, however, outspoken.

"I was laid-back, but I was candid," he admits. "If I was asked about how I felt, I told them. I spoke from my heart."

That characteristic is something he learned from his childhood.

"My dad was strict and believed in the Word of God," Oliver says with a smile.

It was his father, a former Harlem Globetrotter, who gave his son encouragement and ability to

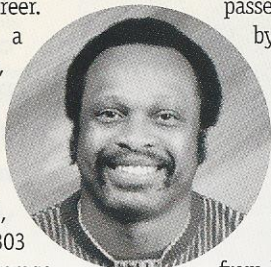


PHOTO BY TOM DIPACE / INSET PHOTO: COURTESY, AL OLIVER

▲ Reason to smile. While with the Expos in 1982, Al Oliver had a monster year. He led the league in hitting (.331), hits (204), doubles (43), and RBI (109). It was his 7th straight year over .300.

become a pro athlete. However, his father would never see Al play on the professional diamond.

Albert Sr. died on September 14, 1968, the day his son was drafted by the Pirates.

It was not the first time Al dealt with a tragic loss. When he was 11, Oliver lost his mother, Sallie Jane.

Again, he's not bitter. "I was blessed to have parents like I did, who taught me about God," he says. "I always believed in Him, but I didn't always do the right things."

Now things are different.

Oliver is a third-generation chairman of deacons at Beulah Baptist Church in Portsmouth.

He's involved in community activities and does some motivational speaking on the side, a task he enjoys.

"Exposure is the key," he says. "I have a story to tell of my life and how I can help people."

Oliver has also been assuming the role of church moderator after his pastor died 2 years ago.

"Right now, my life is built around the church," he says. "I can honestly say that I enjoy being a deacon more than I did playing baseball. If you do right in baseball, it's short term, and justice may or may not be served. But if you do right with God, then it's eternal."

For now, the man Pete Rose called one of the best line-drive hitters to play baseball says he is making plans to be inducted into the Hall of Fame. But it's not baseball he's talking about.

"I'll join my parents in God's Hall of Fame," he says, "where everybody will be on the same playing field." 🇺🇸

Del Duda is a free lance writer who lives in Wheelersburg, Ohio.

Stats Glance

- Led National League in hits (204), doubles (43), RBI (109), and batting average (.331) in 1982
- Collected 2,743 hits in his career—more than Tony Perez, Lou Gehrig, Billy Williams, Ted Williams, Reggie Jackson, Ernie Banks, and Joe Morgan
- Scored 90 or more runs five times in his career