



Minnesota Twins Daily Clips Monday, November 12, 2018

- Tip your cap to Twins icon Joe Mauer with some of the best moments of his career. MLB.com (Garro) p.1
- 7 reasons why No. 7 belongs in the Hall of Fame. MLB.com (Randhawa, Kelly, Park) p.2
- Mauer retires after 15 years, 6 All-Star nods. MLB.com (Bollinger) p.3
- Joe Mauer career timeline. Star Tribune (Staff) p.5
- Joe Mauer's ex-teammates remember him as a role model. Star Tribune (Neal & Miller) p.5
- Joe Mauer will officially retire from baseball. Star Tribune (Miller) p.6
- Joe Mauer could do it all, but baseball is in his blood. Star Tribune (Reusse) p.7
- Is Joe Mauer the most successful athlete from Minnesota? Star Tribune (Hartman) p.9
- Let the Joe Mauer Hall of Fame debate begin. Star Tribune (Souhan) p.10
- It's official: St. Paul's Joe Mauer retiring after 15 seasons with Twins. Pioneer Press (AP) p.12
- Fifteen years a Twin: 'It worked out' for Joe Mauer, hometown team. Pioneer Press (Shipley) p.13
- Joe Mauer will make hall of fame, eventually. 'He'll get my vote.' Pioneer Press (Walters) p.14
- Miguel Sanó, Byron Buxton and the crossroads of the Twins' future. The Athletic (Hayes) p.15
- A full and grateful heart': Joe Mauer announces retirement from baseball. The Athletic (Pierce) p.17
- Joe Mauer's impact on Twins is much larger than what he achieved on the field. The Athletic. (Hayes) p.19
- Twins' Joe Mauer announces retirement. Fox Sports North (AP) p.20
- Former Twin Michael Cuddyer says Joe Mauer "was always gracious". 1500 ESPN (Zulgad) p.21
- Joe Mauer had already earned his spot on list of greatest Twins. 1500 ESPN (Wetmore) p.21

Tip your cap to Twins icon Joe Mauer with some of the best moments of his career

Adrian Garro | MLB.com | November 12, 2018

It's the end of an era in Minnesota, as on Friday Joe Mauer officially announced his retirement. In typical Mauer fashion, he did so by penning a heartfelt thank-you letter to Twins fans, who rooted him on for the entirety of his 15-year tenure in the Majors.

You're surely well aware of how rare it is to see a player stick with one team for the entirety of his career, something that makes Mauer's time with the Twins so impressive. Also impressive were the stats he put up year after year, figures that will likely carry him into Cooperstown a few years from now.

With Mauer's career in the rearview mirror, it's time to appreciate the man's accomplishments on the field. Ones like ...

His first career hit

Before collecting 2,123 base hits, Mauer was a fresh-faced No. 1 Draft pick looking for his first -- and he picked it up on April 5, 2004, with a bouncer up the middle on a 1-2 pitch:

His MVP Award

As he settled in as an everyday difference-maker in Minnesota, Mauer put forth campaigns that earned him sixth-place American League MVP status in 2006 and fourth place in 2008 -- leading to his career year in 2009. After hitting a ridiculous .365/.444/.587 with 28 homers and 96 RBIs (both career highs), Mauer turned that (and his 7.8 WAR) into his first and only MVP Award.

He also became the first catcher to win a batting title three times, after pulling it off in both '06 and '08. The MVP Award was definitely deserved:

His MVP season led to a now-iconic "MLB The Show" commercial that still gets quoted on the internet today -- well played indeed, Mauer.

His double in the '09 All-Star Game

Is it a surprise that Mauer laced a sweet opposite-field double in the All-Star Game that season, marking the only extra-base hit he'd get in the Midsummer Classic in his career?

His 1,000th career hit

In 2010, Mauer was ready to reach the 1,000 hits milestone, which he did in Chicago with a slapped single to left field:

His first-base era

Though he'd take over first base duties mostly full-time in 2013 after concussion concerns limited his time behind the plate, Mauer first appeared there two years earlier -- and, of course, he was a natural:

His first walk-off homer

Though he had collected walk-off hits on a couple occasions in the first decade of his career, Mauer didn't hit a walk-off home run until 2017. Talk about saving the best for (almost) last, right?

His 2,000th career hit

Mauer came into the Twins' game with the White Sox on April 13, 2018, two hits shy of 2,000 -- and he picked them up with ease, of course:

His final hit

Sept. 30, 2018, was a special day for Mauer. His coming retirement all but a foregone conclusion, he was the toast of Target Field that afternoon - - and, in his final at-bat, picked up another easy double to left-center field ... a totally perfect final base hit:

His send-off

The top of the ninth inning of that final game was emotional. Mauer, who had played the game at first base, went behind the plate just one last time for a special one-pitch appearance and hero's ovation afterward:

Truly a stellar farewell to the fans who adored him for so long.

Enjoy your retirement, Joe!

7 reasons why No. 7 belongs in the Hall of Fame

Manny Randhawa, Matt Kelly & Do-Hyoung Park | MLB.com | November 12, 2018

Selected by his hometown team with the first overall pick of the 2001 Draft, Twins franchise icon Joe Mauer debuted with Minnesota in 2004 and never wore another uniform throughout his 15-year Major League career. After officially announcing his retirement on Friday, there's no doubt that Mauer will go down as one of the greatest to ever wear a Twins uniform.

But five years from now, when he is eligible for induction to the National Baseball Hall of Fame, will he also go down as one of the greatest to ever play the game?

To commemorate the conclusion of Mauer's storied career, here are seven reasons why No. 7 should be voted into the Hall of Fame.

- Mauer is the only catcher to claim three batting titles, having paced the American League in 2006, '08 and '09. His .365 mark in the last of those three seasons represents the highest single-season mark by any primary catcher in modern history with at least 500 plate appearances.
- Mauer closed his career with a .388 on-base percentage, which ranked fifth among active players with at least 3,000 plate appearances behind Joey Votto, Mike Trout, Paul Goldschmidt and Miguel Cabrera. Among players who logged at least 5,000 plate appearances and spent at least 45 percent of their games behind the plate since 1900, Mauer's OBP ranks third behind Hall of Famer Mickey Cochrane and three-time World Series champion Wally Schang.

If Mauer had continued playing and made an out in every one of his next 1,050 at-bats, he would still finish with a higher career OBP than Hall of Fame catchers Johnny Bench, Gary Carter and Carlton Fisk.

- A total of 30 players have recorded at least six qualified seasons with a .400 OBP or higher since the Major Leagues integrated, and thus expanded the talent pool significantly, in 1947. Mauer is the only one of those 30 players to log even one of those seasons as a primary catcher, and he spent a majority of his time behind the plate in all six of those campaigns.
- Among that same group of players with 5,000-plus plate appearances and 45 percent of games behind home plate since 1900, Mauer's career 124 OPS+ -- a metric that takes a player's on-base plus slugging percentage and adjusts to the conditions of his era -- ranks 10th. Eight of the nine players above Mauer are in the Hall of Fame, with 1972 World Series MVP Gene Tenace being the only exception. Tenace, like Mauer, logged significant time at first base in the later years of his career.
- According to JAWS (Jaffe WAR Score system), a metric created by Jay Jaffe to evaluate Hall of Fame worthiness at a given position, Mauer ranks seventh all-time, behind Bench, Carter, Ivan Rodriguez, Fisk, Mike Piazza and Yogi Berra. JAWS takes a player's career wins above replacement (Baseball-Reference) and averages it with his seven-year peak WAR. Mauer's score is 47.0, whereas the average score of the 15 Hall of Fame catchers is 44.0. All six catchers ahead of him on the list are in the Hall of Fame, as well as the two behind him -- Bill Dickey and Cochrane.
- From 2004-13, the years that Mauer was primarily a catcher, his 44.7 WAR (Baseball-Reference) dwarfed all others at the position (minimum 45 percent of games at catcher), with Victor Martinez (28.2) and Yadier Molina (27.5) coming in second and third, respectively. Of all players, regardless of position, between '04 and '18, Mauer's 55.1 WAR ranks ninth, behind Adrian Beltre (81.9), Albert Pujols (79.2), Robinson Cano (69.2), Cabrera (68.8), Chase Utley (65.1), Trout (64.3), Votto (58.8) and Ian Kinsler (57.3).
- And even when looking at counting stats instead of rate stats, Mauer compares favorably to elite catchers of the past. Again, among those players with at least 5,000 plate appearances and 45 percent of their games as a catcher, Mauer is one of 10 with at least 2,000 hits -- and six are Hall of Famers. He accomplished this despite having fewer plate appearances than all of them except A.J. Pierzynski and Piazza. He's one of only five in that group to also have at least 400 doubles, joining Hall of Famers Rodriguez and Fisk, along with Pierzynski and Ted Simmons.

Mauer retires after 15 years, 6 All-Star nods
Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | November 12, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- Joe Mauer, one of the greatest catchers in MLB history, is set to officially announce his retirement after a storied 15-year career with the Twins that saw him win an unprecedented three American League batting titles as a catcher, the 2009 AL MVP Award, surpass 2,000 career hits and earn six All-Star selections.

Mauer, who following an injury moved to first base for the last five years of his career and had a memorable sendoff on the last day of the 2018 season that saw him serve as a catcher for one pitch, wrote a letter to Twins fans to make the announcement on Friday night. The club and Mauer will hold a news conference, which can be seen live on MLB.com and twinsbaseball.com, today at 11 a.m. CT to discuss his decision.

"After much consideration I have decided to retire from playing baseball," he wrote in his retirement announcement. This decision did not come easily, as baseball always has been, and always will be one of my greatest passions. The last few months of this season were very emotional for me and I wanted to take time to separate some of those emotions and think with a clear frame of mind. The decision came down to my health and my family. The risk of concussion is always there, and I was reminded of that this season after missing over 30 games as a result of diving for a foul ball."

Mauer, 35, took a little more than a month after the season to make his decision, as he didn't want to hamstring the first office and their plans for the offseason. He retires with five AL Silver Slugger Awards and three Gold Glove Awards, hitting .306/.388/.439 with 143 homers, 2,123 hits, 428 doubles, 1,018 runs and 923 RBIs in 1,858 games with the Twins.

He's Minnesota's all-time leader in doubles and is second in hits behind Hall of Famer Kirby Puckett. Mauer is also second all-time among Twins players in Wins Above Replacement, only trailing Hall of Famer Rod Carew, per baseball-reference.

Given how injuries impacted his career, Mauer will have an interesting case for the National Baseball Hall of Fame, as he's still rates as one of the best catchers, according to advanced statistics. Among catchers, he's eighth all-time in WAR, with all seven backstops ahead of him in the Hall of Fame.

Mauer, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2001 MLB Draft, was the face of the franchise as a local product who grew up in St. Paul. He won his first AL batting title in 2006, and he followed it up by leading the AL in batting average again in 2008 and '09, becoming the first catcher to win three batting titles. His best season came in 2009, when Mauer hit .365/.444/.587, leading the AL in batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage en route to winning the AL MVP Award.

With Mauer set for free agency after that season, the Twins kept him home with an eight-year, \$184 million contract that expired after the 2018 season. Mauer was an All-Star again in 2010, '12 and '13, but he suffered a career-altering concussion on Aug. 19, 2013, which changed the trajectory of his career.

Mauer had to move to first base after the concussion, and he was never quite the same hitter he was before the career-altering injury. He had a resurgent 2017 campaign that saw him hit .305/.384/.417 in 141 games while playing Gold Glove-caliber defense at first, but Mauer hit .282/.351/.379 in 127 games in 2018, missing time again with concussion-related issues stemming from a dive at first base.

The decision to retire isn't a surprise, given how the last game of the 2018 season went, as Mauer had an incredible sendoff. His twin daughters, Emily and Maren, met him at first base before the game to give him a hug. He was then given a standing ovation before his first at-bat, and he later delivered a vintage Mauer double to the opposite-field in the eighth.

But the biggest moment came in the eighth, when he served as catcher one last time for one pitch with the White Sox understanding the situation and not swinging. Mauer was emotional throughout the day and it was evident he was likely to retire after the season.

Twins use GM Meetings to plan for offseason **Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | November 12, 2018**

MINNEAPOLIS -- After being consumed with a managerial search for most of October, Twins chief baseball officer Derek Falvey and general manager Thad Levine used this week's General Managers Meetings in Carlsbad, Calif., to get a better feel for free agency and the trade market.

It's going to be an intriguing offseason for the Twins, who have more payroll coming off the books than any other club in the Majors, and they have several holes to fill on the roster. The club plans to get creative this offseason, and the GM Meetings were the perfect way for the front office to meet with other clubs and agents before the Hot Stove begins to heat up.

"We really used this time to meet with all 29 clubs in some form or fashion and a lot of the agents who are representing some of the free agents," Levine said. "It's been real fact-finding for us. Our vision is to meet with our pro scouts and analytics guys and really start tackling a plan. We gave a plan to ownership before we arrived, but now we have a chance to really refine it."

The Twins have several needs, as they are in the market for starting pitching, bullpen help, two infielders and possibly even a catcher. They've expressed interest in lefty J.A. Happ in the early going and plan to check in on just about every available free-agent starter. But the Twins aren't going to spend money for the sake of spending it, as they're trying to build a sustainable winner and could be more aggressive in future offseasons.

"We've got a lot of financial flexibility, which is a great place to be as a franchise," Levine said. "We're taking the temperature on what it takes to acquire players, but we're also looking at a longer timeline. We're looking at a three-to-five-year stretch where we want to be competitive in the American League Central. We have some resources in terms of financial flexibility and a farm system that is starting to mature and grow."

As Levine pointed out, the Twins are taking more of a long view, as they have a young core of players that includes Miguel Sano, Byron Buxton, Eddie Rosario, Jorge Polanco, Max Kepler and Jose Berrios, as well as top prospects on the way such as middle infielders Royce Lewis, ranked as the club's No. 1 prospect by MLB Pipeline, and Nick Gordon (No. 4), outfielder Alex Kirilloff (No. 2) and right-hander Brusdar Graterol (No. 3).

Sano and Buxton both took steps back in 2018, which is a major reason why the Twins didn't perform to expectations, and they're counting on that duo to lead them back to competitiveness more so than adding several expensive free agents this offseason.

"There's no player we're going to acquire in the free-agent market who has the upside of Miguel Sano or Byron Buxton," Levine said. "I'm not putting the weight of the world on their shoulders, but they have the most ability to make an impact on our fortunes in 2019, and we're very optimistic about those guys. We have every confidence they're going to be major contributors and if they are -- and a few of our other young players take a step forward -- I think we have a chance to surprise people again."

Falvey echoed that statement, as he believes the best way to build a winning franchise is to add to the young core already in place, and having that financial flexibility will make it easier to accomplish their goals.

"We view it the same way every year," Falvey said. "To be successful, we need to build around our core. Our core has to continue to grow and develop. A few took a step back last year and we know that. But we view free agency as a supplement to building a good team and not the primary driver. But because we do have more flexibility than a year ago, we're going to have open-minded conversations about anybody on the board."

So while the Twins aren't expected to be interested in premium free agents such as Bryce Harper or Manny Machado, they're going to check in on just about every other free agent. It'll be interesting to see how they decide to supplement the infield, as they traded both Eduardo Escobar and Brian Dozier at the non-waiver Trade Deadline. Escobar has already re-signed with the D-backs, while first baseman Joe Mauer will announce his retirement with a news conference on Monday.

"As it stands in our mind, we have two open slots in the infield," Falvey said. "Where those are is probably a little bit in question. Jorge, we

believe is a shortstop, but he can play second, and we know Miguel can play third and first. So we'll be creative if we find the right fits."

Joe Mauer career timeline

Staff | Star Tribune | November 12, 2018

High school star: Mauer was a three-sport athlete at Cretin-Derham Hall. He was the Gatorade national player of the year in football as a quarterback, Gatorade player of the year in baseball and all-state in basketball.

Decision time: Mauer committed to play football at Florida State, and was the No. 1 overall pick in the major league baseball draft in 2001. He signed with the Twins for \$5.1 million.

The big time: Mauer made his major league debut in 2004, going 2-for-3 against Cleveland on April 5. He played 15 major league seasons.

History maker: In 2006, Mauer hit .347 to win the first of his three American League batting titles. He is the only catcher to win three.

The best: Mauer won the American League MVP award in 2009. He led the majors with a .365 batting average, hit 28 home runs and drove in 96 runs in only 138 games. He also won a Gold Glove at catcher.

Big deal: On March 22, 2010, Mauer agreed to an eight-year, \$184 million contract, making him the fourth-highest-paid player in the major leagues at the time.

Sea change: Mauer hit .324 in 2013 and made his sixth All-Star team, but following the season he was moved from catcher — where he won three Gold Gloves — to first base because of concussion issues. From 2014-16, he never hit above .277.

Back to Joe: The Twins won a surprise wild-card berth in 2017 when Mauer hit .305. Another concussion during the 2018 season convinced him that he should retire, however.

Fitting finale: In Mauer's final game, on Sept. 30 against the White Sox at Target Field, he doubled in his final at-bat, then put on his catching gear for the first time since 2013 and caught one pitch.

The future: Mauer, 35, and his wife, Maddie, have 5-year-old twin daughters and are expecting this month. Following five years of retirement, he is eligible for the Baseball Hall of Fame ... did he have enough good years to be elected?

Joe Mauer's ex-teammates remember him as a role model

La Velle E. Neall III & Phil Miller | Star Tribune | November 12, 2018

Joe Mauer was a baseball rarity, someone who spent his entire career with the same team, and in his home state, no less.

After 15 seasons with the Twins — including six as an All-Star catcher, seasons so strong that they will move him into Hall of Fame consideration — Mauer retired Friday at age 35, fearful of another concussion.

"I played with Joe for seven years, and even longer than that if you count a couple spring trainings," said former teammate Brian Dozier. "When you talk to younger guys about what it takes to be a professional baseball player, I think you can say two words: Joe Mauer. That's what kind of player you want to have in your organization.

"He's the man, in all facets of the game."

St. Paul born and raised, Mauer was likely the best all-around high school athlete in state history. He was a national player of the year in both football and baseball and all-state in basketball at Cretin Derham Hall. He chose baseball, signing with the Twins after they took him No. 1 in the 2001 draft.

He made his major league debut in 2004, earning consideration as the state's most popular athlete as the Twins earned playoff berths and made the move from the antiquated Metrodome to sparkling new Target Field in 2010.

"Baseball is about so much more than winning or losing," he wrote in his farewell letter. "It's about so much more than personal stats and accolades. For me, it's about the life lessons I learned along the way. It's about the struggles and triumphs that put things into perspective."

Mauer was known for his patience at the plate, his smooth lefthanded swing and his calm demeanor. He did the little things well; a savvy baserunner, he was a Gold Glove winner at catcher and, after moving to first base, became Gold Glove-caliber at that position as well.

Glen Perkins has known Mauer most of his life, even pitched to him in high school games around the Twin Cities. So when they both became major leaguers, Perkins said, it didn't occur to him how unusual Mauer's talent was.

"I took it for granted because I saw him every day. I saw him for years," said Perkins, the Twins' former closer and a three-time All-Star. "It never struck me how good he was until the World Baseball Classic. I'm standing in the outfield with other pitchers during batting practice, and they're saying, 'He is so unbelievable. The ball hits the barrel every time.' It was eye-opening for me. I didn't realize how revered he was. I had played with him since high school, so to me, he's just Joe."

Mauer last caught in 2013, moving to first base because of concussion issues. He suffered another concussion during the 2018 season, which he said in his letter helped seal his decision.

His final at-bat came on an opposite-field double at Target Field against the White Sox on Sept. 30, leaving his career batting average at .306.

"In this world of professional sports there are only so many role models like Joe Mauer," said Twins outfielder Robbie Grossman. "It's an honor to play with a guy who has done so much for the game on and off the field and just a class act."

"Look at the last at-bat he had. That was a perfect Joe Mauer at-bat. If you want to remember a Joe Mauer at-bat, that last at-bat when he hit that double on the 3-2 pitch was amazing."

Mauer made history by becoming the only catcher in major league history to win three batting titles.

After Mauer left his final game wearing catching gear for the first time since 2013, his friends and teammates suspected he was headed for retirement, but many also hoped he would return to play.

"Me and Joe had a lot of talks leading up to it this whole year, and where he was at," said Dozier, who was traded to the Dodgers in late July and played in the World Series. "I didn't know if he was actually going to or not. Watching from afar and seeing all the things that happened when he got to go back in and caught, I knew that he probably had made the decision."

"But, I can tell you, he can play for many more years. That bat still plays."

Reaction from the baseball community lit up social media.

"Joe Mauer ... you have always gotten it! Great career!! Better person!! You know who you are and have stayed true to your values!!" tweeted Frank Viola, a hero of the Twins' 1987 World Series champions.

Eric Hosmer of the Padres, who battled Mauer for many seasons while playing with the Royals, tweeted: "Nothing but respect Joe! You were an MVP on and off the field. Good luck with the next chapter."

Twins special assistant Michael Cuddyer, a longtime teammate, told MLB Radio, "I can't think of a single person who represented an organization, a community and his city as well as Joe did."

Joe Mauer will officially retire from baseball
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | November 12, 2018

It was an unremarkable play during a unmemorable game, so innocuous that it doesn't appear in the box score. But it wound up changing Twins history.

Joe Mauer has played his final game, a decision he announced Friday but one that can be traced back to that mid-May game in Anaheim. Trying to make a lunging catch on a foul pop fly just out of his reach, Mauer tumbled awkwardly to the ground. The St. Paul native got up and continued the game, but the impact had jarred his head and stung his neck. The diagnosis came within days: Another concussion.

Mauer, who had been forced to abandon his favored position as a catcher in 2013 by a series of concussions, sat out a month to recover, and played out the season, even finishing with a final-day flourish by catching one last pitch behind the plate. But with a wife and two daughters to consider, and another child on the way, that seemingly harmless foul ball forced an agonizing choice to give up the sport he loves for "what is best for me as a husband and a father."

Joe Mauer's letter to Twins fans: 'The decision came down to my health and my family'
Retirement, he said in a letter to fans posted on the Twins' website, "came down to my health and my family. ... If I were to continue playing this game, I would want to do so without reservation, and I no longer feel that is possible."

The decision was not unexpected, not after the emotional parting between Mauer and Twins fans during the season's final game. But it still was a jolt to his teammates, current and former, and those who watched him become a three-time batting champion, six-time All-Star, 2009 Most Valuable Player, and one of the greatest players in Twins history.

"He's on the Twins' Mount Rushmore," said Glen Perkins, another Minnesota native and MLB All-Star who spent his entire career playing for the team he cheered on as a child. "After that last game, I texted him. I said, 'Congratulations on a hell of a career.' He texted back, 'Not bad for two kids from Minnesota.'"

Not bad at all. Mauer, the first player chosen in the 2001 draft after a storied baseball, basketball and football career at St. Paul's Cretin-Derham Hall High, reached Minnesota three years later and spent 15 seasons in the big leagues.

"He had the best swing I've ever seen by an amateur," said Mike Radcliff, the Twins' scouting director at the time, who recommended that the team select the hometown superstar. "Smooth, technical, balanced — an almost perfect baseball swing."

Mauer used it to collect 2,123 hits, more than any Twin but Kirby Puckett. His 428 doubles are the most in Twins history. He batted above .300 eight times during his career, and in 2006 he became the first AL catcher ever to win a batting title, putting up a .347 average.

His .328 average in 2008 earned him another batting title, and his career best .365 average, along with 28 home runs and 76 RBI, made him the fifth Twin ever elected MVP. He was also awarded three Gold Gloves as the league's best defensive catcher, and became a national star featured in advertisements for Head and Shoulders and PS3 video consoles. "Well played, Mauer," became a viral catchphrase, uttered in a video game commercial in 2010.

But if his game was attention-getting, Mauer tried to avoid the spotlight off the field.

"You never heard a single bad thing about Joe. He was happiest when he could go unnoticed," said pitcher Jake Odorizzi, Mauer's teammate through his final season. "But he was a joy to play with and get to know in the clubhouse. I wish I would have had the chance to throw to him as a catcher."

If not for the concussions, Odorizzi figures, "he could play for another five years at a high level, maybe more."

Maybe so, but Mauer, whose eight-year, \$184 million contract expired last month, made it clear that his wife, Maddie, 5-year-old daughters Maren and Emily, and the baby due later this month, are more important.

"I find myself thinking about my future health, and its impact on my family, more than I had years ago. People always told me how much things change when you become a parent, and they were right," Mauer wrote in his farewell letter.

"There is a part of me that will always want to compete, but I have reached a point where my desire to play is outweighed by the possibility of another injury."

Terry Ryan was the Twins general manager who approved the decision to draft Mauer with the first pick in 2001.

"It's a shame that he couldn't stay behind the plate, and it's a shame that [concussions] cut short his career," Ryan said. "But we're all human beings first, husbands, fathers. He had a marvelous career, but baseball comes in behind every one of those. And that last day — what a way for him to go out."

It was a farewell, in a Sept. 30 game with the White Sox, that neatly summed up his career. His daughters joined him at first base for the national anthem. He blasted a line drive in the seventh inning for a double, his final hit. And Mauer brought the large Target Field crowd to deafening cheers and heartfelt tears in the ninth, when he appeared on the field in his catcher's gear for the first time in five years.

After a raucous ovation, he squatted behind the plate, caught one last pitch, hugged pitcher Matt Belisle, and headed off, we now know, into retirement.

He realized it, too.

"The answer I was searching for came into sharper focus during my last game, a game I will never forget and a day where I felt like everything I was questioning started to become clear," Mauer wrote. "As I stood on the field in my catcher's gear, something I never thought would be possible again, I realized that this is how I wanted to finish my career."

Joe Mauer could do it all, but baseball is in his blood

Patrick Reusse | Star Tribune | November 12, 2018

retin-Derham Hall was going for its second consecutive state football title and Eden Prairie was going for the third of what are now 11 of those titles. They were playing on Thanksgiving weekend in 2000 and the Prep Bowl crowd in the Metrodome was extra large for the Class 5A championship.

Joe Mauer had led the Raiders to a title as a junior, and would be signing with Florida State in February as the No. 1 quarterback recruit in the country. Eden Prairie led 21-14 but Cretin-Derham Hall was driving late for a tie. Or a victory.

“I might have gone for two,” Rick Kallok said Friday. “I was a gambler, and I had Joe.”

Kallok was Cretin-DH’s coach, and he was on the phone after it became public that Mauer’s baseball retirement, which was obvious on the last day of the 2018 season, was set to become official Sunday with newspaper ads thanking fans. His football career had ended 18 years earlier, on that Friday night vs. Eden Prairie.

“Joe had tremendous attributes: He could throw all the passes, he had coachability and an understanding of the game,” Kallok said. “I think he probably threw one pass in two years as the starter for us that he regretted, and it was that one in the Dome ... just a touch behind Tony Leseman, his main guy.”

Greg Winegarden intercepted the pass at the goal line and headed down the sideline, and Eden Prairie kicked a field goal to guarantee a 24-14 victory.

Mike Grant, the Eden Prairie coach then and now, said: “Joe Mauer was as good a quarterback as we’ve had in the state of Minnesota. And the smartest, too, because he chose baseball and had a great and long career, over football, where those are harder to achieve.”

Grant paused and said: “That’s one of the great plays we’ve had at Eden Prairie. We were lucky to stop Joe. Winegarden was a sophomore when he made that play. We’d always say, ‘Wino, you let a lineman catch you from behind on that one against Cretin. How’d you let that happen?’ ”

The lineman was Ryan Harris, who wound up playing 11 years as an NFL offensive lineman. In Kallok’s opinion, Harris could have been teamed up again with Mauer in the pros, if Joe had gone the football route.

“If Joe had gone to Florida State and played quarterback, he would have wound up playing on Sundays,” Kallok said. “There’s no doubt about that.”

Dennis Fitzpatrick, a basketball lifer from St. Paul, says emphatically that Joe’s talent as a 6-foot-3 guard at Cretin deserves attention in the summation of his athletic career. Fitzpatrick was a pal of Rick Majerus and the large man was in St. Paul, scouting Mauer’s teammate, Steve Sir, for a possible scholarship to Utah.

“Rick’s eyes kept drifting off to Mauer,” Fitzpatrick said. “And he’d say, ‘Are you sure he’s going to play baseball?’ ”

Leseman was the target of that one regrettable pass. They are the closest of friends to this day, with a third young Mauer child about to join the three young Leseman children (6 and below) in a marathon of play dates/scrum.

“Joe and I met in Little League, and we started hanging out because our interests matched,” Leseman said. “We played the same three sports. Joe was just a regular good athlete, about the same size as the rest of us, until the summer after our freshman year. Then, he shot up 5 or 6 inches to over 6 feet, and I never moved from 5-foot-8.

“Joe didn’t always win at everything, but once he figured out the game within the game, he was on his way.”

Fitzpatrick says that basketball was Joe’s favorite sport, and recruiting services said he was the best senior quarterback in the country, but Mauer’s game was always going to be baseball.

“He reminded me as much of myself as any hitter, including Tony Gwynn,” Rod Carew said Friday. “Joe could take the ball to left field as easily as I did ... hit it on a line out there. And he wasn’t afraid to hit with two strikes.

“He didn’t have an ego. He just played his game. And when he had to move from catcher, he learned to play first base to the point that I thought he could have won a Gold Glove. I moved to first base myself; it’s not as easy as people seem to believe.

“What can you say about the guy? He won three batting titles as a catcher.”

Not quite on par with winning seven at second base and then first, as did Carew with the Twins, but it’s dang close.

And here's my bottom line on Mauer's official retirement: The main regret in this for the Twins should be they are losing their second-best player from 2018.

Is Joe Mauer the most successful athlete from Minnesota?

Sid Hartman | Star Tribune | November 12, 2018

The first time I asked Joe Mauer about the possibility of his joining the Twins was in February 2001. Mauer was a 17-year-old senior at Cretin-Derham Hall and had just completed one of the best prep football seasons in state history.

Then-Twins General Manager Terry Ryan, who was holding on to the No. 1 overall pick in the 2001 MLB draft, told me, "There is a good chance we would take him No. 1. He is the best prospect I've seen since I joined the Twins here."

Mauer was told about the quote, and asked about his options between playing football at Florida State, where he had a full-ride scholarship from legendary coach Bobby Bowden, and playing baseball for the Twins.

"Well, if that's what they're saying, first pick or whatever, I probably wouldn't play football," Mauer said. "But if things didn't work out [in baseball] I'd have something to fall back on."

Mauer never needed to fall back on anything.

Over 17 years in the Twins organization, he put together a career that matched the greatest players who ever wore a Twins uniform, players such as Rod Carew, Harmon Killebrew and Kirby Puckett. That career officially came to an end with Friday's announcement that Mauer will retire.

But there is an argument to be made that the combination of Mauer's performance for the Twins and his performance as a prep athlete at Cretin-Derham Hall makes him the most successful athlete in state history.

Sure, you had great in-state prep athletes such as Paul Molitor, Dave Winfield, Larry Fitzgerald Jr. and Kevin McHale who went on to Hall of Fame careers, but most or all of their professional lives were spent playing outside of Minnesota.

Then you have the all-time pro greats such as Puckett, Carew, Killebrew, Torii Hunter, Kevin Garnett, Randy Moss, Carl Eller, Fran Tarkenton, Ron Yary, Cris Carter, Carl Eller, Alan Page and Mick Tingelhoff, but of course they weren't born and raised in Minnesota.

Concussions left a mark

Mauer's final career numbers of a .306 batting average, .388 on-base percentage, 143 home runs, 428 doubles, 923 RBI and 2,123 hits are both a tremendous accomplishment and a look at how injuries robbed him of some of his offensive prime.

Before his concussion symptoms Mauer was a career .323 hitter and got on base at a .405 clip through his first 10 MLB seasons.

For some context on just how good Mauer was his first 10 years, the only qualified hitters in the expansion era (since 1961) to post better career batting averages than .323 are Tony Gwynn (.338), Roberto Clemente (.331), Wade Boggs (.328) and Carew (.328).

Mauer did that while playing the most physically and mentally demanding position in baseball at catcher. It was simply unheard of.

His legacy with the Twins will only grow over time. Mauer ranks first in times on base, second in hits, walks and games played, third in batting average and on-base percentage and fifth in RBI.

And I believe in a few years, Mauer will take his place alongside the game's greats in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Young Gophers never quit

The Gophers football team's 41-10 victory over Purdue on Saturday could not have been more impressive. It showed that all of the talk about this young team getting better was true.

After coach P.J. Fleck fired defensive coordinator Robb Smith last weekend and installed Joe Rossi in an interim role, it was clear that the season was in jeopardy.

In this victory, everything went right in a frigid environment at TCF Bank Stadium.

“Really proud of our football team’s response,” Fleck said. “Purdue is an incredible football team. I mean they’re averaging 485 yards of offense, No. 2 offense in the Big Ten, No. 13 in the country.”

Add in the fact that the Gophers defense had been giving up 507.7 yards per game through six Big Ten games, that was the second-worst mark in the conference. But the Gophers, 10½-point underdogs at home, flipped the script against the Boilermakers.

They held Purdue star quarterback David Blough to 142 passing yards. The Boilermakers gained only 233 total yards, compared to the Gophers’ 415. It was their lowest single-game yardage and point total on the season.

The Gophers played incredible. In beating Ohio State last month, Purdue had put up 539 total yards of offense, including 378 passing yards by Blough. In beating Iowa last week, Blough had 333 passing yards and Purdue 434 total.

Fleck had to be proud of two veteran leaders in senior Blake Cashman and junior Thomas Barber. They led a defense that held Purdue to 0-for-12 on third down.

“I am just really proud of this team’s response and their resolve and their resiliency,” Fleck said. “This team showed a lot of heart, character and integrity tonight.”

And now if the Gophers can protect home field at TCF Bank Stadium against Northwestern and reach a bowl game, they would be one of the best examples of overcoming adversity in the country.

JOTTINGS

- ESPN Insider graded the Timberwolves trade of Jimmy Butler to Philadelphia along with Justin Patton for Dario Saric, Robert Covington, Jerryd Bayless and a second-round pick as a B for the Wolves and a C-minus for the 76ers. Writer Kevin Pelton wrote, “Adding two starters will improve Minnesota’s depth as the team hopes to salvage this season while keeping an eye on the future. From the Timberwolves’ standpoint, there’s a lot to like about this deal. Unlike reported offers from the Houston Rockets and Miami Heat, this one doesn’t force Minnesota to take on any negative, long-term salary.”

- According to ESPN NFL reporter Bill Barnwell, Vikings receiver Adam Thielen and defensive lineman Danielle Hunter are in the hunt for Player of the Year awards.

- Vikings defensive line coach Andre Patterson has given his group the “Rushmen 4 Life” nickname, which he coined back during his first stint with the Vikings in 1998-99. That group had four sacks in the red zone last week vs. Detroit.

- One side effect of NBC moving the Vikings-Bears game next Sunday to 7:30 p.m. is how it impacts the Bears’ travel schedule. Chicago has to play at Detroit in the early game on Thanksgiving, about an 85-hour turnaround that is perhaps the shortest turnaround any NFL team can have.

- Gophers men’s basketball coach Richard Pitino on his tough schedule: “We’ll be tested early. We play Utah the second game of the season in our building [Monday], Texas A&M, Santa Clara, Washington [those three games are in Vancouver], at Boston College, Oklahoma State, obviously the Big Ten has a couple games early [at Ohio State and vs. Nebraska]. We will know where we stand.”

- Former Gophers football coach Tracy Claeys, now the defensive coordinator at No. 8 Washington State, has been nominated for the Broyles Award, given annually to the best assistant coach in college football.

Let the Joe Mauer Hall of Fame debate begin

Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | November 12, 2018

Joe Mauer’s Hall of Fame candidacy will test the power of last impressions.

He spent the 2010s recovering from injuries, changing positions and failing to maintain a level of excellence that might have made him the greatest hitting catcher in baseball history. He finished his career as a first baseman whose greatest asset was the ability to draw walks.

Anyone wanting to dismiss him as a potential Hall of Fame inductee need only activate their short-term memory.

Should Mauer’s resume be that easily discarded?

A look at Twins history reveals the difficulty and unpredictability of judging players whose careers were damaged by injuries.

After the first seven years of his career, the key question regarding Mauer was not whether he would make the Hall of Fame, but whether he’d be

given a corner office. Even factoring in the years he dealt with concussions or other physical problems, Mauer ranks third all-time in OPS (on-base plus slugging percentage) based on games played as a catcher.

After 10 seasons in the big leagues — including 2004, when he was injured after 35 games — Mauer was on an historic path. By the end of the 2013 season, he had, in the previous eight seasons, made six All-Star teams, won an MVP award, finished in the top 10 of the MVP voting three other times, won three Gold Gloves and five Silver Sluggers.

Even his mystery ailments and the lost 2011 season couldn't tarnish that resume.

Then concussions forced him to become a first baseman, and probably diminished his ability to be a better player as a first baseman, and only once in his last five seasons did he post an OPS of better than .800 — at .801, in 2017.

His career OPS before 2014: A remarkable .873.

Compare Mauer's resume to those of Hall of Fame catchers, and he looks like he belongs, whether you count merely the games he played at catcher or his overall offensive statistics.

It's Twins history that makes Mauer's case so fascinating. He may be just as qualified as Kirby Puckett, who was a first-ballot Hall of Famer, and he may have been no more dominant in his prime than Tony Oliva, who did not make it.

Puckett played 12 seasons. His OPS-plus (the statistic adjusted for ballpark factors and other variables) was 124. Mauer's career OPS-plus was also 124.

Puckett finished in the top 10 in MVP voting seven times but never won the award. He made 10 straight All-Star teams and won six Gold Gloves. He won one batting title to Mauer's three while playing a less-taxing position.

I believe Puckett was deserving of the Hall because he:

- Was consistently excellent.
- Reached 2,000 hits faster than anyone other than Wee Willie Keeler.
- Was the best player on two World Series winners.

Puckett also benefited from sentimentalism. Voters viewed him as an ambassador for the sport and remembered Game 6 in 1991, and saw the tragic end of his career as all that kept him from 3,000 hits and certain enshrinement.

Mauer was a demonstrably more valuable player during the first six years of his career than was Puckett during his first six seasons, and the two were of similar value for the next four years of their careers. If Puckett's 12 years of excellent were good enough, wouldn't 10 years of history-making excellence at a more difficult position be qualifying?

For the first 10 seasons of his career, Oliva, like Mauer, was well on his way to enshrinement. Before he suffered the knee injury that would depress his career, Oliva had an OPS-plus of 141 and an OPS of .867.

In his first eight full seasons, he was an All-Star eight times, finished in the top 20 of the MVP voting each year and won one Gold Glove and a rookie of the year award.

Wins Above Replacement (WAR) is not a perfect statistic but it is the most common reference point in the modern age gauging a player's overall value, including defense.

Mauer's career WAR: 55.1. Puckett's: 51.1. Oliva's: 43.1, in part because of the years he played after his injury and the fact that he played a less-important defensive position.

All three played like Hall of Famers for about a decade before their careers were altered.

Should Mauer be voted into the Hall? Should he receive the benefit of the doubt — like Puckett and unlike Oliva?

The numbers say yes, and numbers are more trustworthy than our short-term memory.

It's official: St. Paul's Joe Mauer retiring after 15 seasons with Twins
Associated Press | Pioneer Press | November 12, 2018

St. Paul's Joe Mauer has decided to retire from the Twins after 15 seasons with his home-state team.

"After much consideration, I have decided to retire from baseball," Mauer said in an open letter to fans released by the Twins on Friday evening. "The decision did not come easily as baseball always has been, and always will be, my greatest passion."

The Twins will hold a news conference at Target Field at 11 a.m. Monday. Mauer is expected to attend with chief baseball officer Derek Falvey, general manager Thad Levine and team president Dave St. Peter.

Mauer, 35, was unavailable for comment. He and his wife, Maddie, are expecting their third child at any time.

"Thank you, Minnesota Twins, and thank you, fans, for making my career as special and memorable as it was," Mauer wrote in his letter. "Because of you I can leave the game I love with a full and grateful heart."

Mauer's eight-year, \$184 million contract expired after this season.

In his 15 major league seasons, Mauer appeared in six all-star games, won three Gold Gloves and three batting titles, and racked up 2,123 career hits, all with the Twins.

The end of Mauer's contract created a natural parting from the game he grew up with in St. Paul, less than 10 miles from the downtown Minneapolis ballparks he called home with the Twins.

The first overall pick in the 2001 draft out of Cretin-Derham Hall, the same program that produced Hall of Fame member Paul Molitor, Mauer made his debut at the Metrodome on April 5, 2004, two weeks before his 21st birthday. He signed his mega-deal three weeks before the Twins began playing at Target Field in 2010.

Mauer acknowledged down the stretch this season he wasn't sure whether he was interested in continuing to play, with twin 5-year-old daughters at home and a third child on the way. Then came the final game of the season on Sept. 30, when he doubled in his last at-bat and donned his catcher's gear to symbolically take one more pitch in the top of the ninth inning as he tearfully waved to the adorning crowd.

Not many players could experience a farewell more poignant.

What made the moment so emotional was the fact that Mauer had not been behind the plate since Aug. 19, 2013, when a foul tip banged off his mask and triggered a concussion that forced him to move to first base for 2014.

While his athleticism — he had a scholarship waiting for him to play quarterback at Florida State and was a sharpshooting guard on the basketball team in high school that qualified for the state tournament — allowed for a relatively smooth transition on defense, the effects of the head injury robbed him of his prowess at the plate for most of the next three years.

As a catcher, easily the game's most demanding and dangerous position, Mauer's offensive ability was Hall of Fame-worthy. In 2006, he became the first catcher to lead the league in batting average since 1942. He did so again in 2008 and in 2009, when he hit .365 with a .444 on-base percentage and a .587 slugging percentage to top the AL in all three categories and win the MVP award. In Mauer's final 10 games as a catcher before the concussion in 2013, he went 17 for 43 with three doubles, three homers and nine RBIs.

Staying healthy became a challenge, however, and his popularity lessened some in a state usually fiercely proud of homegrown players due to the size of his contract and the amount of his absences.

A knee injury limited his rookie season to 35 games, and a strained left quadriceps had him on the disabled list for more than a month in 2007. Back trouble sidelined him for all of April in 2009, when Mauer still managed to hit 28 home runs, by far his career high. In 2011, soreness and weakness in both of his legs kept him out for more than two months.

Moving to first base allowed him to play more often, but between 2014 and 2016 his cumulative average was just .267, and the three highest strikeout totals of his career came in each of those seasons.

His renaissance came in 2017 as the Twins went from 59-103 to 85-77 and earned a spot in the AL wild-card game, with Mauer batting .305 with 36 doubles, the second-highest total of his career. That made it easy to see Mauer playing beyond 2018, but in the end he opted to walk away with a .306 batting average and a place in the top five on the team's career lists in a clear majority of offensive categories. He is their all-time leader in

doubles and times on base and second in hits behind Kirby Puckett.

Fifteen years a Twin: 'It worked out' for Joe Mauer, hometown team
John Shipley | Pioneer Press | November 12, 2018

The Twins had their choice of any player available in the 2001 amateur draft, including dominant Southern Cal right-hander Mark Prior and Mark Teixeira, the slugging switch-hitter from Georgia Tech just named college player of the year.

The Twins used their No. 1 pick on a high school catcher from Cretin-Derham Hall named Joe Mauer, who turned down a football scholarship from Florida State to sign with the hometown team.

“It worked out,” said Terry Ryan, the Twins’ general manager at the time. “It worked out for the Twins, it worked out for Joe Mauer, it worked out for our market.”

Eighteen years later, Mauer, 35, has retired as the Twins’ leader in doubles and reaching base safely, and second in hits. He made his retirement official Friday evening in an open letter to fans released by the Twins, explaining that after two serious concussions — the last in May — he wanted to protect his health and be there for his growing family.

Mauer and his wife, Maddie, are expecting their third child this month.

“There is a part of me that will always want to compete,” Mauer wrote, “but I have reached a point where my desire is outweighed by the possibility of another injury.”

Mauer’s decision was widely expected in the wake of an emotional season finale at Target Field, where Mauer doubled in his final at-bat and put on his old catcher’s gear for one last, and largely ceremonial, pitch at his favorite and best position in a 5-4 victory over the Chicago White Sox.

Ryan, now a special assignment scout for the Philadelphia Phillies, was watching that game on a television in Florida.

“I had it on and was not thinking much about it, all the sudden things started happening and I thought, ‘Uh-oh, this might be it,’ ” Ryan said Saturday. “It was a wonderful ending to a phenomenal career.”

Mauer will be at a news conference scheduled for 11 a.m. Monday at Target Field.

Choosing Mauer in the 2001 draft was close to a slam dunk, but not entirely. Prior was considered nearly major-league ready, and in fact made his major league debut in 2002. Teixeira had just hit .427 with a 1.319 OPS at Georgia Tech. He made his major league debut in 2003 and hit 409 career home runs with Texas, Anaheim, Atlanta and the New York Yankees.

“Those were the guys under serious consideration,” Ryan said. “And you have to remember, Joe is a local guy. We were very knowledgeable about him as a young man, his family history, the multi-sport thing, what he was like off the field.

“Then there was the catching position, which is difficult to find — plus he was a left-handed-hitting catcher, and an offensive catcher.” Mauer skipped Triple-A and made his major league debut in 2004. Within five years he had won three batting titles — a first for a catcher — three Gold Gloves, four Silver Slugger Awards and an American League Most Valuable Player award. He won all four in 2009, when he hit .365 with 28 home runs, 96 RBIs, a .444 on-base percentage and a .587 slugging percentage.

It might have been the best season by a catcher in baseball history, and earned Mauer an eight-year contract worth \$23 million a year that expired at the end of this season. Twins chief baseball officer Derek Falvey and general manager Thad Levine expressed interest in re-signing him, but Mauer was ready to retire.

“Joe made everything look easy. I stood in the on-deck circle and watched,” Justin Morneau wrote Saturday on his Facebook page. As the “M&M Boys,” Mauer and Morneau led the Twins to AL Central Division titles in 2004, 2006, 2009 and 2010.

“He dominated his position in a way a no catcher had before: Batting titles, high on base percentage, Gold Gloves, MVP,” Morneau wrote. “Joe was the most important hitter in our lineup. He was the definition of a superstar. He made everyone around him better because he was so consistent in his approach to the game. The moment never got big on him. He was poised. Most importantly he was humble.”

Serious concussions in 2013 and last season changed everything for Mauer, making him a first baseman in 2014 and, ultimately, ending his career prematurely.

“Joe was up there with the greatest catchers who ever played,” Ryan said. “Unfortunately, there was a lack of longevity. That’s the only

difference.”

Mauer remained a valuable player as a first baseman, and in 2017 helped the Twins get back to the playoffs for the first time since 2010 when he hit better than .300 for the eighth time in his career. He hit .282 last season and retired with a .306 career average.

His contract was a source of irritation for a subset of Twins fans who felt Mauer didn’t hit for enough power — he never came close to the 29 homers he hit in his last season at the Metrodome — and his composure on and off the field made some believe he wasn’t a clubhouse leader, or even passionate enough to be the team’s highest-paid player.

That’s not true, longtime teammate Brian Dozier said.

“Joe has the ability to command a room by his presence and what he’s done and how much people respect him,” Dozier said Saturday. “Guys like that don’t really have to be vocal, you just do you and people follow. He wasn’t the big rah-rah or outspoken guy; he was so good at being who he was that he didn’t have to be.”

Dozier, who played in the World Series after being traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers at the non-waiver trade deadline, said Mauer also had his occasional outbursts.

“He’s a guy that doesn’t show too many emotions to the cameras and others, but trust me, there have been plenty of times when I feel sorry for all the stuff near the bathroom when he’s in a funk, or strikes out, or thinks there was a bad call,” he said. “There are times you walk in after that and see a Joe Mauer ash bat splintered into a thousand pieces; buckets and balls all over the place — everything. That’s happened a time or two.”

Ryan credits Twins vice president for player personnel Mike Radcliff, then the team’s scouting director, with the final decision to draft Mauer in 2001. And it was Bill Smith, who succeeded Ryan as GM in 2007, who signed off on Mauer’s \$184 million contract extension.

“Billy was the GM at the time, but the entire organization, ownership, knew that he was going to get a better contract from someone else,” Ryan said. “It was a very competitive situation. He was coming off an MVP season; you don’t let a player like that in his prime just walk away. Billy did the right thing, and it was a mutual agreement because he wanted to stay in Minnesota.”

“There were teams that were large-market clubs that would have grabbed him off the open market; Billy never let him get there. Bill and the front office did a good job on that one, in my opinion. Unfortunately, the concussion business hindered his ability to play catcher.

Joe Mauer will make hall of fame, eventually. ‘He’ll get my vote.’
Charley Walters | Pioneer Press | November 12, 2018

Next for Joe Mauer is the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. That’s my opinion. But it will take a while, maybe 15 years.

Mauer, 35, who made his retirement from the Minnesota Twins official this weekend, won’t become eligible for hall of fame voting for five years. Then Baseball Writers Association of America voters will consider that Mauer, as a catcher, won three American League batting titles, a league Most Valuable Player award, three Gold Gloves and was a six-time all-star.

Mauer is the only catcher in baseball history to win three batting championships. He ended up with 2,123 career hits and a .306 lifetime batting average.

Had concussions not driven Mauer to first base for his final five seasons, there would be little doubt he would be joining fellow St. Paul natives Dave Winfield, Paul Molitor and Jack Morris in Cooperstown.

Over the years, including last summer, I asked baseball’s greatest catcher, Johnny Bench, about Mauer’s hall of fame potential.

“It takes 10 years to be in the hall of fame, for sure, as a catcher,” Bench said. “The batting titles, the MVP will help a whole lot. There will be people who will vote and say, well, he was a very good player and they’re not necessarily going to vote for him, or they’re going to vote.”

I’m a voter — he’ll get my vote.

How about this extraordinary stat from MLB.com: “If Mauer continued playing and made an out in every one of his next 1,050 at-bats, he would still finish with a higher on-base percentage than hall of fame catchers Johnny Bench, Gary Carter and Carlton Fisk.”

What seems unjust is that during his 15-year career with the Twins, Mauer played in just 10 postseason games — none with a victory.

It’s hard to understand why the Twins, when designing Target Field, didn’t configure it for Mauer, who the year before the ballpark opened hit 28 home runs in the Metrodome, a good share of them landing just feet over the fence in left field.

Shortening the left-field distance by a half-dozen feet at Target Field, where Mauer would play his next nine seasons with his inside-out swing, might have helped the Twins win more games.

Miguel Sanó, Byron Buxton and the crossroads of the Twins' future

Dan Hayes | The Athletic | November 12, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. — As they enter an offseason in which they're flush with cash and winning the division seems attainable, the Twins are in the midst of the most unfortunate experiment.

What happens to a team's expectations when two of its foundational players yield a dismal performance? Thought to be potential stars and building blocks headed into last season, Byron Buxton and Miguel Sanó couldn't have performed much worse against their projections than they did in 2018.

Expected to produce 6.2 f-Wins Above Replacement by Dan Szymborski's ZiPS model, Buxton and Sanó combined for minus-0.4 WAR in 2018. Throw in other poor performances, including second baseman Brian Dozier, and the upstart Twins knew they were done by July.

Had everything gone according to plan, the financially-flexible Twins might be in a much more enviable position this winter with visions of Bryce Harper or Manny Machado dancing in fans' heads. Instead, they're in a decidedly more cautious spot as the hot stove heats up.

Rather than put the finishing touches on a championship roster, the predicament has left chief baseball officer Derek Falvey and general manager Thad Levine in an unpleasant position of trying to determine what they actually have.

"We experienced maybe the fifth- to 10th-percentile outcome relative to what we thought we could get," Falvey said from the GM meetings this week. "That's just reality. Some of it is injury. Some of its performance. Some is a combination of everything.

"It's a factor. It has to be. When we came into this year, we felt we had made some strides the previous year. (We were) coming off the second half of '17 feeling like we had really grown as a team. To have our offense take a step back this year, we didn't close the gap to Cleveland as much as we would have hoped. We were hopeful we would continue to close the gap.

"We hope we can get those guys back on track in the short-term."

When dealing with younger players, there's an expectation they could wind up taking a step backward in their development. Development isn't linear. Teams can't, nor should they expect, that a player will continue trending upward in the same direction once they get going. Players may figure something out in Year 1 and improve before the league adjusts in Year 2, which leads to struggles and an adjustment from the player.

That's why teams and analysts have large projection swaths for each player, to prepare for the possibility of a disaster, an unexpected breakthrough, or something in the middle.

"With young players, you can't anticipate a perfectly straight trajectory north, and if you do you're making a mistake," Houston Astros GM and president of baseball operations Jeff Luhnow said. "Some work out better than expected. Some are right around (it). Some went down. You really have to look at it as a portfolio of players and here's the expected value of each individual player, here's the expected value of the portfolio together. But you have to recognize that's the expected value and the outcomes are going to be very different than that and have some contingency plans."

Coming off a 2017 season in which they snuck into the wild-card game and surprised everyone with 85 victories, the Twins attempted to put everything in place.

With Sanó an All-Star in 2017 and Buxton coming off a second-half breakthrough, the hope was that Twins' duo had begun the ascent everyone attached to them earlier in their days as highly-touted prospects.

They added around Buxton, Sanó and Dozier — all of whom were projected to be top-50 players — accordingly. But nothing went right.

Coming off his surgery and an offseason full of personal turmoil, Sanó never got going and required a midseason conditioning trip to the minor leagues. Buxton started slow, had migraines, broke his toe during a rehab, rushed back and struggled while attempting to heal and ultimately was banished to Triple-A.

"When you have all these projection systems, as sophisticated as we hope they are, the two seasons those two just put together were not on the spectrum of things that we expected," Levine said.

Throw in the struggles of Dozier, who was projected for 4 WAR by ZiPS, and the Twins' hopes quickly fell apart.

On paper, Dozier was projected for a .257/.341/.482 with 31 homers, 88 RBIs and 15 steals in 666 plate appearances, according to ZiPS. It was suggested that Buxton would hit .246/.305/.426 with 18 home runs and 24 steals in 538 trips and Sano would wind up at .245/.337/.494 with 30 home runs and 87 RBIs in 531 plate appearances.

In reality, Dozier struggled defensively after winning a Gold Glove and hit .227/.307/.405 with 16 homers before he was traded to the Dodgers at the July 31 deadline. Sanó batted .199/.281/.398 with 13 homers in 299 plate appearances and Buxton batted .156/.183/.200 with no homers in 94 trips.

"It's frustrating, and it happens in baseball all the time," Luhnow said. "We had the fifth- to 10th-percentile outcome in our ALCS against Boston.

You just have to deal with it and move on, and if there's anything that you did that led to you having a lower percentile outcome, you need to recognize that and adjust it. But sometimes it's just the nature of our game."

Even if you believe last season's performances were merely an outlier and understand your player is far better than his numbers, it's also human nature to question what you can reasonably expect moving forward.

That's where the Chicago Cubs found themselves with Anthony Rizzo following a 2013 season in which he underperformed.

After arriving in the majors for good in 2012, Rizzo hit .285/.342/.463 with 15 home runs in 87 games. Expectations were high for Rizzo, who had struggled in 153 plate appearances with the San Diego Padres in 2011.

But by 2013, Rizzo was supposed to have solved it. Instead, he hit .233/.323/.419 in 690 plate appearances and the Cubs were baffled. Rizzo has since righted the ship again to become one of the more dominant middle-of-the-order bats in baseball. Over the past five seasons, Rizzo has averaged hitting .282/.385/.512 with 30 homers and 100 RBIs. He has produced 22.3 f-WAR in that period.

Still, after 2013 the Cubs didn't know if he'd ever arrive at this point.

"You'd be lying to say it didn't affect how we viewed him as a player as we thought about our lineup and what it was going to be," Cubs GM Jed Hoyer said. "It'd only be natural to think, 'If these guys get back where they are, we're one thing. If they don't, we're another.' Your range of outcomes becomes really high."

Which is exactly where the Twins reside as they plan for the 2019 season.

Had they received even middling play from Buxton and Sanó, the Twins could have taken advantage of excess financial resources to supplement a roster on the verge of greatness in the midst of one of the more intriguing free-agent classes in recent history. More than \$85 million of the franchise-record \$128.7-million payroll in 2018 vanishes off the books this offseason, the most freed up money in all of baseball, according to Fangraphs.

Falvey and Levine are bullish on Sanó turning it around after he learned some harsh lessons about conditioning in 2018. Sanó lost 30 pounds during his six-week minor-league trip and said he's eager to lose more this offseason, agreeing to work in an offseason program created by the Twins.

They also believe Buxton can find his way back to the player who hit .309/.358/.538 with 12 homers and 16 steals in his final 270 plate appearances in 2017.

But without a firm grasp of what they have, the Twins can't proceed forward at full speed ahead.

Now, the focus becomes helping Buxton and Sanó turn it around while there's still time and then worry about catching the Cleveland Indians, who look to be shedding payroll after several dominant seasons.

"We're going to be very focused this offseason in doing whatever we can in our power to put the best possible resources we can around those two guys as well as some of our other young players," Levine said. "We're aware that if these guys realize their potential in 2019 at the major-league level, it's a much different conversation about our competitive landscape. We're hopeful that we can do everything we can to put them in the position to impact us in that regard."

The Twins believe new manager Rocco Baldelli is a key piece to that plan. They're hopeful Baldelli, 37, can relate to his young charges and get the best out of them. Baldelli said at his introductory press conference last month that an important part of reaching his players will be getting to know them on and off the field.

Since he was hired on Oct. 25, Baldelli has spent part of each day talking to his new players. There are also plans to meet some in person, and you'd have to think Buxton and Sanó are high on that list.

"I want to learn as much as I can about these guys, talk to people who have spent a lot of time around all of them and also meet them and actually talk to them before I feel like I have any ability to help them," Baldelli said last month. "As I sit here right now, I don't have any answers. I can only say it's a process, and I'm very much looking forward to connecting with these guys and talking with them. Just as much as I would be able to share with them, I want to hear what they have to say. I think that's probably the best place for me to start."

While they're not certain about where they'll be at the beginning of 2019, Levine said the front office believes they'll have the support of ownership if everyone is convinced the Twins and their young duo are back on track.

The Twins will spend money this winter regardless. They know they need more starting pitching, a middle infielder, potentially a corner infielder after Friday's announcement that Joe Mauer is retiring, and a designated hitter. The bullpen could also use some depth. But it certainly isn't the same blueprint they'd have had if everything went according to plan in 2018.

"As we evaluate the 2018 season, we may have been left with an equal number of questions as answers," Levine said. "The primary focus (now) is to put the resources around our younger core to see if we can get those guys collectively to take a step forward."

"If they do, I think we have primed ownership to then give us the green light to take more of an aggressive step forward with this unit of players. I think Derek and I and our group would feel much more emboldened to take that step forward if we saw meaningful progress from the group because we think they're massively talented and could really put us back in the position where we were in the second half of 2017."

A full and grateful heart': Joe Mauer announces retirement from baseball **Zack Pierce | The Athletic | November 12, 2018**

Joe Mauer put on the catcher's gear one last time, caught one last pitch, then spent a long moment in the sun waving to fans who'd watched him play for 15 years with the Twins and for years before that in youth baseball too.

It felt like goodbye on that September day, and now we know it was.

Mauer has announced his retirement from baseball via [a letter to fans posted on MLB.com](#) and later dispersed by the Twins, a move expected by many after his emotional season finale and the mounting concern over his long-term health.

"After much consideration, I have decided to retire from playing baseball," Mauer wrote in the letter. "The decision came down to my health and my family. The risk of concussion is always there, and I was reminded of that this season after missing over 30 games as the result of diving for a foul ball. ... I am soon to be a father of three and I find myself thinking about my future health and its impact on my family more than I had years ago."

The Star Tribune first reported Mauer's decision to retire earlier Friday.

It brings to an end one of the most storied local baseball careers, that of a St. Paul kid who followed in the footsteps of fellow St. Paul natives Paul Molitor, Dave Winfield and Jack Morris, all of whom also spent time with the Twins. Mauer hit .306/.388/.439 for his career, made six All-Star appearances and was the American League MVP in 2009. He won the AL batting title three times — the only AL catcher to ever win it at all and the first catcher in either league to do it more than twice.

But injuries — most notably those concussions — necessitated a change from catcher to first base in 2014 and increasingly weighed on his feelings about his future as his eight-year, \$184 million contract approached its end this season.

"If I were to continue playing this game," he said in the letter, "I would want to do so without reservation and I no longer feel that is possible. There is a part of me that will always want to compete, but I have reached a point where my desire to play is outweighed by the possibility of another injury."

Even after the Twins' season ended following [the memorable final act at catcher](#), Mauer still was unwilling to commit to a decision. But he acknowledged in the letter that he knew that was it.

"As I stood on the field in my catcher's gear," he wrote, "... I realized in that moment that this is how I wanted to finish my career. I wanted to finish on my home field in front of our amazing fans, my family, my friends, my teammates, and the organization that means so much to me. Being able to do that for a brief moment as a catcher, made that day even more incredible than I could have imagined."

Mauer closed his letter by thanking the team and fans who were with him on the journey.

“Because of you, I can leave the game I love with a full and grateful heart,” he said.

Mauer’s decision was one of the key pieces for the Twins to sort out in an offseason full of questions they didn’t expect to have when this season began. As a disappointing follow-up to last season’s 85-win campaign and wild-card appearance unfolded, the team traded away several regular players, including franchise mainstays like Brian Dozier and Eduardo Escobar. At season’s end, they relieved Molitor of his managerial duties, replacing him with Rocco Baldelli.

Now, they’re loathe to go all-in in the free-agent market given the overall setback and the struggles of young cornerstones like Byron Buxton and Miguel Sanó, [whose development is so critical to the franchise’s future](#). With Mauer not returning, the Twins also must account for the loss of their starting first baseman and one of their most reliable bats.

Drafted out of Cretin-Derham Hall High School in 2001, Mauer debuted for the Twins in 2004. He went 2 for 3 with two walks in his first-ever game, getting his first major-league hit on a single off Indians reliever Rafael Betancourt. He hit .308/.369/.570 in a 35-game season slowed by a knee injury.

From there, he set off on a path to become one of the most decorated Twins ever. He hit .294 in 131 games in 2005 before breaking out in 2006, when he hit .347 and finished sixth in AL MVP voting.

That was the first of six All-Star seasons for Mauer to go along with three consecutive Gold Gloves at catcher from 2008-2010. Everything came together for him in 2009, when he hit a career-best .365 and dramatically increased his power numbers, hitting 28 home runs — easily the highest total for his career. It was all enough to make him the AL MVP that year and earn him that huge contract extension in the days before the 2010 season began.

After hitting .327 in another All-Star campaign in 2010, things began to take a turn for Mauer. He had knee surgery that offseason, then dealt with the now-infamous “bilateral leg weakness” and other ailments in a 2011 season that saw him miss half of the Twins’ games. His .287 average was a career low to that point.

He returned to All-Star form in 2012 and the first half of 2013, but he suffered a concussion in an Aug. 19 game and went on the disabled list the next day. Mauer didn’t play another game that season.

By the time he returned for the 2014 season, Mauer had been converted to first base in an effort to save the wear and tear on his body and protect him from further concussions. His next three seasons were his worst in terms of average. He hit .277 or lower in each before rebounding in 2017 and topping .300 once again.

His 2018 season wasn’t quite as successful. The average dipped to .285, the OPS to .729, just 11 points better than his career worst. But Mauer ticked off some milestones along the way. He reached 2,000 career hits on April 12, the last of a 10-game hitting streak to open the season. During a July game in Kansas City, he became the Twins’ all-time leader in doubles.

But there was also another concussion incident when he laid out for a foul ball in a May game in Anaheim. In the final year of his mega-contract, speculation began as to whether Mauer would retire rather than come back for less money and risk even more injury. Then, in a September interview with the Star Tribune, he admitted he would consider retirement in the offseason.

That all led to the memorable regular-season finale, when Mauer got a hit in his final at-bat and then put on the catcher’s gear one last time, playing the position for the first time since that concussion in 2013. He caught one pitch, then enjoyed a tearful moment in front of Twins teammates and a Target Field crowd determined to honor him if, in fact, that was his final game.

After all that time and all those hits, Mauer’s name is everywhere on the leaderboards in the franchise’s Minnesota era. He ranks third in WAR among position players, behind just Rod Carew and Harmon Killebrew. Only Killebrew played more games in a Twins uniform than Mauer’s 1,858. Only Killebrew and Kirby Puckett scored more runs. Only Puckett had more hits than Mauer’s 2,123. And even for a guy not known for RBIs, he ranks fifth there, behind Killebrew, Kent Hrbek, Puckett and Tony Oliva.

You might notice the other five names Mauer is listed with there are the five position players whose numbers the Twins have retired. It shouldn’t be long before he joins them.

Joe Mauer's impact on Twins is much larger than what he achieved on the field

Dan Hayes | The Athletic | November 12, 2018

As if his major-league debut weren't already enough of a whirlwind, the final out brought with it a stunning revelation for Trevor Hildenberger. Even though he wouldn't figure in the play at first base, the Twins rookie reliever sped over toward the bag to cover for a potential mistake that would never happen.

On the receiving end of second baseman Brian Dozier's throw was Twins first baseman Joe Mauer, who easily secured the final out. Without any hesitation, Mauer then directed his attention toward Hildenberger and offered him congratulations.

And that's when it hit Hildenberger. He'd just made his MLB debut, closing out a 5-0 Twins victory at Cleveland on June 23, 2017, and none other than Joe Freaking Mauer was there with him to revel in the moment.

"Joe catches the ball and then shakes my hand," Hildenberger said. "He shook my hand and said 'Congrats' to me for closing it out. Twins win. It was kind of surreal for me. 'What the fuck am I doing on the same field as Joe Mauer? How can (he) possibly be my teammate right now?'" As of Monday morning, Mauer will no longer officially be a teammate of Hildenberger or any other Twins. The St. Paul native is set to announce his retirement from baseball after 15 seasons, all of which were spent with the Twins. Citing health concerns and wanting to be there for his young, growing family, Mauer, 35, will step away from the game he loves after a marvelous career.

While Mauer made a name for himself on the field with a Most Valuable Player award, three batting titles, three Gold Gloves, five Silver Slugger awards and six All-Star appearances, he secured an equally strong legacy in the clubhouse. Though much public scrutiny surrounded whether or not Mauer was a leader, his teammates left no doubt about the possibility, showering him with praise for the way he set a strong example for all and left an unforgettable imprint on the only franchise he ever knew.

"I hope all the young guys can see how consistent, how classy, how professional, how competitive, how routine-oriented, how selfless that this individual is and has been for so long," said reliever Matt Belisle, whom Mauer chose to be the pitcher on the mound for his memorable last hurrah at catcher in the team's regular-season finale. "He doesn't take one day for granted.

"It's just another example of what it is to be a long-lasting great career in Major League Baseball and to do it with class. Everybody knows Joe is a better person than he is a player."

Addison Reed discovered how good of a person and a teammate Mauer was this season. He'd heard the stories praising Mauer's likability. No chance they could all be true, he thought.

Turns out Reed was wrong.

"He can't be that good of a guy," Reed said. "Everybody was saying he's a great person. I'm sure he's pretty cool but has some flaws. People didn't tell me enough how nice he was. He's a pro's pro. Goes about everything the right way, the amount of work he puts in to get ready. Just how kind he is to everybody. There's nobody he doesn't talk to. I wish I could think of something where he's not decent at. He's perfect at everything."

Max Kepler couldn't find anyone better to learn from than Mauer, the first American League catcher to win a batting title and the only catcher ever to win three. Even though Kepler was around for the end of Mauer's career, the post-concussion portion when he was never quite the same, he found the veteran's approach to be flawless.

"Watching him every night is like a learning experience," Kepler said. "He's patient. He has a very good feel for what his zone is, what he likes to hit. He has a plan every time he goes up there. You can tell he's fully in control and it starts with the motions and the mindset. I don't know if he is, but that's what comes off.

"He doesn't adapt or adjust to what the pitchers try to do to him. He follows and sticks to his plan. It's impressive. Sometimes I get away from, I forget what my strengths are because they're trying to do this or that to me. You're always trying to adjust and then you forget about what you do well. He seems unfazed and sticks with it."

Said Hildenberger: "He could hit until he's 80."

And then there's the postgame speeches, with Mauer awarding a game ball after victories. With incredible detail, Mauer recalled each and every point of impact during a victory and highlighted it to a gathering of his teammates. The ceremony evolved over the final two seasons of Mauer's career as he got more comfortable being vocal in a young clubhouse.

The end result was a loud, raucous party with players hooting, hollering and repeating Mauer's oft-repeated catchphrases. But buried within was a message to young Twins players on the correct way to go about their business on a daily basis.

“Honestly, it was enlightening in a couple ways,” pitcher Tyler Duffey said. “Just to see him do that and kind of take the reins with it. It also shows how much you may not realize everything going on in the game.

“Insignificant in the grand scheme, but that little thing changed the game. It created for all of us an environment where everything that everyone did became valuable. Teams that do well, it’s a community. It’s a true team. Everyone contributes that little thing every day.”

Pitcher Kyle Gibson said Mauer’s legacy will also include his impact on Minneapolis and St. Paul. Not only does Mauer support the Twins Rookie League and R.B.I. programs, he’s active in multiple charitable endeavors throughout the community.

“He’s a guy you look to,” Gibson said. ““Hey, what can I do in the community?” I look to him to be a great example of that. I think the Twin Cities will forever have the fingerprint of the Mauers on it because of what he and his wife have accomplished and will accomplish going forward.”

It’s just one more example why Hildenberger was in awe on that day in Cleveland. The legend is about far more than what Mauer did on the field. Seventeen months later, Hildenberger still can’t believe he got to play with Mauer, but he’s glad he got the chance.

“He’s been nothing but an ideal role model,” Hildenberger said. “Everyone talks about it all the time, the way he carries himself. The way he approaches good days and bad days exactly the same. The way he has to prepare his body, the diligent work he puts in every day is pretty inspiring.

“He’s (been) an absolute pleasure to play with.”

Twins’ Joe Mauer announces retirement

Associated Press | Fox Sports North | November 12, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Joe Mauer is retiring after 15 major league seasons, six All-Star games, three Gold Glove awards, three batting titles and 2,123 career hits, all with his hometown Minnesota Twins.

“Thank you, Minnesota Twins, and thank you, fans, for making my career as special and memorable as it was,” Mauer wrote in a full-page ad that will run Sunday in the Minneapolis Star Tribune and St. Paul Pioneer Press. “Because of you I can leave the game I love with a full and grateful heart.”

Mauer’s eight-year, \$184 million contract expired the day after the World Series ended, creating a natural parting from the game he grew up with in St. Paul, less than 10 miles from the downtown Minneapolis ballparks he called home with the Twins.

“The decision came down to my health and my family,” Mauer wrote. “The risk of a concussion is always there, and I was reminded of that this season when I missed 30 games as a result of diving for a foul ball. That’s all it took this time around and it was all I need to bring me back to the struggles I faced in 2013.”

The first overall pick in the 2001 draft out of Cretin-Derham Hall High School, the same program that produced Hall of Famer Paul Molitor, Mauer made his debut at the Metrodome on April 5, 2004, two weeks before his 21st birthday. He signed his megadeal three weeks before the Twins began playing at Target Field.

Mauer acknowledged down the stretch this season he wasn’t sure yet whether he was interested in continuing to play, with twin 5-year-old daughters at home and a third child on the way for him and his wife, Maddie. Then came the final game of the season on Sept. 30, when he doubled in his last at-bat and donned his catcher’s gear to symbolically take one more pitch in the top of the ninth inning as he tearfully waved to the adorning crowd. Not many players could experience a farewell more poignant than that.

What made the moment so emotional was the fact that Mauer hadn’t been behind the plate since Aug. 19, 2013, when a foul tip banged off his mask and triggered a concussion that forced him to move to first base

“The concussion I experienced that season not only changed my life professionally with a move to first base, but changed me personally as well,” Mauer wrote.

While his athleticism — he had a scholarship waiting for him to play quarterback at Florida State and was a sharpshooting guard on the basketball team in high school — allowed for a relatively smooth transition on defense, the effects of the head injury robbed him of his prowess at the plate for most of the next three years.

As a catcher, easily the game’s most demanding and dangerous position, Mauer’s offensive ability was Hall of Fame-worthy. In 2006, he became the first catcher to lead the league in batting average since 1942. He did so again in 2008 and in 2009, when he hit .365 with a .444 on-base

percentage and a .587 slugging percentage to top the AL in all three categories and win the MVP award. In Mauer's last 10 games as a catcher before the concussion in 2013, he went 17 for 43 with three doubles, three homers and nine RBIs.

Staying healthy became a challenge, however, and his popularity lessened some in a state usually fiercely proud of homegrown players due to the size of his contract and the amount of his absences.

A knee injury limited his rookie season to 35 games, and some strained left quadriceps had him on the disabled list for more than a month in 2007. Back trouble sidelined him for all of April in 2009, when Mauer still managed to hit 28 home runs, by far his career high. In 2011, soreness and weakness in both of his legs kept him out for more than two months.

Moving to first base allowed him to play more often, but between 2014 and 2016 his cumulative average was just .267 and the three highest strikeout totals of his career came in each of those seasons.

His renaissance came in 2017 as the Twins went from 59-103 to 85-77 and a spot in the AL wild card game, batting .305 with 36 doubles, the second-highest total of his career. That made it easy to see Mauer playing beyond 2018, but in the end he opted to walk away with a .306 batting average and a place in the top five on the team's career lists in a clear majority of offensive categories. Mauer is their all-time leader in doubles and times on base and second in hits behind Kirby Puckett.

Former Twin Michael Cuddyer says Joe Mauer "was always gracious"

Judd Zulgad | 1500 ESPN | November 12, 2018

Michael Cuddyer spent eight seasons as a teammate of Joe Mauer with the Twins and saw Mauer win three American League batting titles and the 2009 AL MVP in that time. But it wasn't Mauer's on-the-field success that Cuddyer focused on Friday night during an appearance on MLB Network Radio on SiriusXM.

"I can't think of a single person who represented an organization, a community and his city as well as Joe did," Cuddyer said of the St. Paul native. "That's what is so unique about the situation. Growing up in St. Paul, obviously, being a huge Twins fan, being entrenched in the community, getting drafted by the Twins No. 1 overall, making such a huge impact early in his career and his historical run as a catcher in a city where he grew up in. And then to represent it the way he did.

"You never heard bad things talked about him. He was always gracious to anybody who ever came up to him and gave back to the city, gave back to the community. Checked all the boxes. He's the person you want your son or daughter to look up to and he's been that for so long in that area and will continue to be. That's what is so cool about him and the situation is he's not going to be leaving that area and that city. That's his home and he's going to be somebody for everybody to look up to for forever."

Cuddyer retired after playing for the New York Mets in 2015 and has served as a special instructor for the Twins. Cuddyer wasn't the only former Twins player who acknowledged Mauer's retirement Friday.

Former Twins closer Glen Perkins, who was born in St. Paul and attended Stillwater High School, knew Mauer long before they became teammates with the Twins. Perkins, who retired after the 2017 season, took to Twitter to share a couple of photos of the two, including one long before they reached the big leagues.

Former Twin Michael Cuddyer says Joe Mauer "was always gracious"

Derek Wetmore | 1500 ESPN | November 12, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS – Come to Target Field any game day between late March and late October and you're likely to notice bars on every level, with beer and other drinks at the ready out beyond the left-field fence in foul territory at Target Field. Sandwiched between those bars you'll notice an important piece of Twins history, maybe 50 feet above the native Minnesota limestone that rises out of the left-field seats of the lower level.

Those are the retired numbers of the greatest Twins in franchise history, and each has his jersey number displayed in raised red text inside a circle against a white backdrop.

The row of honored players from the past is pretty well full, and soon they'll have to make more room. It won't be long before Joe Mauer's No. 7 is hanging alongside those other all-time greats. He didn't need 2,000 hits to prove it; along the way he's made sure one day his name will be written in the group that includes Killebrew, Carew, Oliva, Blyleven, Hrbek and Puckett.

Joe Mauer picked up two more base hits Thursday night against the White Sox to nudge his career total up to a nice round number of 2,000 hits. Famously understated, Mauer said after the game the moment was "pretty special."

Only Rod Carew (2,085) and Kirby Puckett (2,304) have more hits in a Twins uniform than Mauer. When you count the walks, only Harmon

Killebrew has reached base more times than Mauer since he franchise relocated to Minnesota in 1961. Those are some big names.

“He’s going to downplay it, it’s who he is,” manager Paul Molitor said. “But it’s one of those things that over time he’ll have a chance to look back on it and remember that this was a special night.”

Mauer walked in the 1st inning Thursday and rapped an RBI single in the 3rd, base hit No. 1,999. The announced crowd of 15,474 seemed to know what that signified. Mauer was on the doorstep.

He struck out in the 5th inning, which delayed the celebration. Later, a teammate told Mauer in the dugout, ‘You’re going to get 2,000. How do you feel?’

“Excited,” Mauer told him.

He walked to the plate in the 7th inning with a bat in his hand and teammates standing on second and third base, the Twins had a 2-0 lead. Facing lefty Aaron Bummer, Mauer took a close pitch at the knees for ball 1. Several foul balls and a pitch in the dirt later, Mauer got a sinker in basically the same spot as the first one. He hit a 3-hopper back up the middle and by the second baseman for a 2-RBI single.

The game paused for a few moments. The ball was collected (and later given to Mauer in a plastic baggie). Mauer tipped his helmet to the cheering crowd, as his teammates all stood at the top step of the dugout and showed the first baseman some love with rounds of applause.

Play eventually resumed, a nice moment passed. The inning ended with Mauer stranded on first base. The stadium public address announcer made everyone aware of the accomplishment. Mauer thanked the crowd with a few waves, and looked like he was holding it together. Byron Buxton hopped out of the dugout with Mauer’s glove and cap, handed them to him and then wrapped Mauer in a hug. That started a line of teammates onto the field, on their way to their respective positions, to give Mauer a congratulatory hug.

“That was awesome,” Mauer said of the fan ovation he received. “Leading up to it, I really didn’t think it was that big of a deal. But I got emotional. It was fun to see the fans, the boys at the top step, and family up there [in the stands], too.”

The souvenir baseballs will probably go to his parents, for now. “Over the years I’ve said I didn’t want to put them up [on display] to get content. There’ll be some day where I’ll put them up,” he said.

Texts and messages started streaming in well before the hit, congratulating him, touching base and wishing him well. After the game, his teammates got together and gifted him an extra-large bottle of wine, which they all signed in gold-colored sharpie

Some will contend that it’s no big deal, that it’s an arbitrary milestone; no different than 1,999 or 2,001 hits, for that matter. But it is a big deal. Mauer can try to downplay it (typical Joe Mauer) and his critics can try to tear down the significance of the moment (also typical), but both of those attempts came up well short Thursday night.

The great thing about round-number accomplishments and other career milestones is not that they’re cool for their own sake. They’re special because they allow us a moment – they give us an excuse – to pause and reflect on the level of excellence that led to that point.

Thursday’s career milestone is just the latest in a long line of accomplishments for a guy who won three batting titles as a catcher and also an American League MVP award.

Joe Mauer has hit .309 in his 15 seasons in the big leagues; he’s got a .392 career on-base percentage. For years, he was one of the best hitters in baseball and he did it at a position that didn’t used to ask for a whole lot of offense. When you think about sweet left-handed swings from the past few decades, Griffey comes to mind but the kid from St. Paul has got to be on the short list.

And speaking of short lists, not many former Twins players can claim the kind of career Mauer has put together. It was a moment to remember, yes. But Mauer didn’t need 2,000 hits. He already belonged in the company of the greatest Twins players ever to pull on the uniform.