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Joe Mauer's Hall of Fame Case Begins Behind the Plate

Ben Lindbergh | The Ringer | November 14, 2018

The Twins legend's retirement jump-starts one of the more interesting Cooperstown candidacies in recent memory. He didn't hit like a catcher, but he should be judged like one.

On Friday, Joe Mauer announced his retirement. And on Monday, during a poignant press conference at Target Field, many Twins fans wept with him as he said goodbye, the once-thick thatch of inky hair that helped soothe so many itchy, flaky scalps cropped close and sprayed with gray.

Mauer meant a lot to most Twins fans: A Saint Paul native who stayed home his whole career, he ranked third all-time in career WAR with the Twins, behind Rod Carew and Harmon Killebrew. His highlight reel is a little light on national signature moments, both because he didn't have eye-popping power or speed and because he played for forgettable teams; the Twins ranked 19th in wins and winning percentage during his Minnesota tenure, and he played in only 10 postseason games, all of them losses. In my mind, the most salient snapshots from his 15-year career are his nonchalant no-look catch of a ball that bounced off the backstop, a well-played line in a PlayStation ad, and a sentimental moment from his final game, when he wore catcher's gear in a game for the first time in five years.

A lack of back-breaking homers, iconic October bat flips, equally iconic fielding flips, or incredible catches that capture a career with one GIF shouldn't diminish what Mauer accomplished with constant contact, a steady diet of walks and singles, and a good glove at the most important position. In the wake of his farewell, the topic turned to Cooperstown, as it often does when a player who appears to be on the Hall of Fame bubble calls it a career. He has the pedigree: Mauer went from no. 1 draft pick to no. 1 prospect (in back-to-back years) to no. 1 player. In his five-year peak from 2006 to 2010, no AL hitter had a higher FanGraphs WAR (or Baseball Prospectus WARP). He has hardware, including a 2009 AL MVP award, three batting titles (a first for a catcher), and three Gold Gloves; five Silver Slugger awards; and six All-Star appearances. And he has a spotless off-the-field record, with no character-clause concerns to derail his induction. This is a man who costarred with his mom in a milk commercial.

What Mauer lacks is longevity: Although he's easily the leader in games among 6-foot-5 players who caught in at least 40 percent of their appearances, he spent only 10 seasons behind the plate, making 885 starts at catcher before a concussion forced him to first base. Height makes a catcher's body a bigger target for foul tips, and it also increases the strain on his knees. Earlier in his career, Mauer's lower body ate into his squatting time; according to Baseball Injury Consultants, he hit the DL 10 times and lost a total of 500 days to injury over the course of his career, and only two of those DL stints were attributable to concussions. It doesn't help his case that the final third of his career came as a roughly league-average player: More Mientkiewicz than Killebrew, Mauer sported a below-average bat for his power-centric adopted position but compensated by becoming a top-five fielder. By the time he hits the Hall of Fame ballot, his last season as a star-level player will be as distant as his debut was when he had to quit catching.

Because Mauer's catching career was cut short, some voters may deem the total package disappointing. Mauer's 44.7 Baseball-Reference WAR through age 30 ranks fifth all-time among all players who caught in at least three-quarters of their games through that age—topping Mike Piazza, Mickey Cochrane, and Yogi Berra, among others—so it is disappointing that he caught only one professional pitch thereafter, even though it's hardly his fault that catching dangerously rattled his brain. There's also the matter of Mauer's subpar power. "The 36 doubles and 13 home runs he hit last year are going to slowly morph into something more like 25/25 over the next few years," Baseball Prospectus wrote after the 2006 season, but 13 proved to be his second-highest homer total. Mauer's 2009 MVP power output was an outlier that inflated expectations: That year,

he went deep 28 times without any notable corresponding increase in fly-ball rate, hard-hit rate, or pull rate. The extreme spike stemmed from more of his flies leaving the park, which was partly a product of 11 fence-scraping “Just Enough” homers, tied for the fifth-most of that type in the AL.

Many Minnesotans also see Mauer as a disappointment because he couldn’t catch for the majority of the period covered by the eight-year, \$184 million extension he signed in 2010, still the largest awarded to a catcher or a Twin. Still, it’s hard to hold a brain injury against a guy—or it should be, although some injury-shaming local columnists didn’t seem to see things that way. Plus, the perception that Mauer made too much money by baseball standards is more a function of timing and MLB’s collectively bargained indentured-servitude system than his own shortcomings; Mauer made \$218 million over the course of his career, but his production would have been worth \$307 million on the free-agent market. If his contract prevented the Twins from making other upgrades, that’s on ownership, not Mauer.

None of those slights should diminish what Mauer did do, which puts him in an exclusive class of catchers despite his relatively brief backstop stay. His .328 batting average as a catcher leads all players with at least 1,000 plate appearances at the position, and his .408 on-base percentage as a catcher ranks second, trailing only Cochrane, who retired (a year younger than Mauer) more than eight decades ago. Admittedly, Mauer never suffered a decline phase as a catcher that would have dragged down those stats, but he amassed an enormous amount of value by hitting so well when he was at catcher, a position so demanding on defense that the offensive baseline is low. Only seven catchers have ever put together a better 10-year stretch than Mauer’s best decade: Gary Carter, Johnny Bench, Mike Piazza, Iván Rodríguez, Yogi Berra, Cochrane, and Thurman Munson. That’s six Hall of Famers and Munson, who was killed in a plane crash at 32 but like Mauer won one MVP award and three Gold Gloves. And although the above stats don’t incorporate receiving, Mauer excelled at that too, ranking well above average in his first eight seasons behind the plate before falling slightly below in his last two. (Among the 34 catchers with at least 30,000 framing opportunities from 2004 to 2011, Mauer ranked eighth on a rate basis in called strikes added, according to Baseball Prospectus, saving 68 runs.)

Add it all up—well, all except for the framing—and Mauer compares favorably to the catchers who are already enshrined. Both Mauer’s career WAR and his peak WAR (defined as a player’s best seven seasons) clear the average totals for Hall of Famers who accumulated the majority of their career value at catcher. Naturally, so does his JAWS score, which averages the two and puts him in seventh place at the position.

That positional context makes all the difference to Mauer’s Cooperstown candidacy. Consider the cases of Mauer and David Wright, two perfect contemporaries whose wholesome careers ran along parallel lines. Both are 35 and spent their entire careers with the teams that selected them in the first round of the 2001 draft. Both made the majors in 2004, and both looked like Hall of Fame locks through age 30. And both encountered a series of serious injuries that diminished their skills and ultimately ended their time in the majors—though not before they took emotional career curtain calls on consecutive days.

From 2004 to 2013, which conveniently encapsulates both of their healthy and productive periods, Wright recorded a 137 wRC+ with 47.2 Baseball-Reference WAR; Mauer managed a 134 wRC+ with 44.7 WAR. Wright hit slightly better and made almost 900 more plate appearances over that span, while Mauer offered much more defensive and positional value. It all came close to evening out. And although Mauer tacked on more post-peak production than Wright did, the two are almost indistinguishable in terms of career value. Average the three win-value metrics at FanGraphs, Baseball-Reference, and BP, and Wright emerges with a tiny two-win lead, 53.7 to 51.6.

Yet when Wright retired, he was widely described as someone who was on a Cooperstown trajectory until injuries intervened, whereas Mauer is receiving more serious Hall of Fame buzz.

Catching is incredibly difficult, as Mauer’s career makes clear. Because of the physical demands of the position, catchers don’t last as long as players at every other position, which prevents them from racking up equivalent career WARs. Even at their peaks, they don’t play as many games or make as many plate appearances, which limits their ceilings; Mauer’s 7.8 WAR in 2009, when he became the first catcher to lead his league in batting average, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage, was the fifth-highest single-season catcher total of all time, less than one win behind the leader. WAR includes a positional adjustment that gives catchers a boost relative to other players on a per-plate-appearance basis, but it doesn’t give them any extra credit for career length. Hall of Fame third basemen—who fall in the middle of the positional pack—boast 28 percent more career WAR and 25 percent more peak WAR than their catching counterparts. As a consequence, it makes sense to compare catchers to catchers—and Mauer clears the bar for his cohort, while Wright comes in under the bar at third base.

Mauer wasn’t behind the plate for his whole career, and both he and we wish that he could have been back there longer. But because so much of his value came at catcher, he deserves to be considered a catcher for Cooperstown purposes. Mauer can take the time before his Hall of Fame run to relax or embark on a second career of drinking milk and making mixtapes. And we should take that time to remember what he was: one of the best ever to play a position that chews up players and spits them out too soon.

More gates, more turf, more accessible photo ops going in Target Field for 2019 season
Rochelle Olson | Star Tribune | November 14, 2018

Twins are covering the \$5M-\$6M work aimed at enhancing security, traffic flow.

The Minnesota Twins are messing with the Gold Glove, the larger-than-life sculpture on Target Plaza outside Gate 34, the entrance named for the late Kirby Puckett.

The 7-by-9-foot cast bronze mitt, a favorite spot for fans to meet and pose for photos, is being moved as part of a \$5 million to \$6 million offseason renovation project to expand the plaza area outside Gates 34 and 29, where two-thirds of fans enter Target Field.

The Twins last season made some changes inside Gate 34, to ease congestion where right field meets first base. Now the team is doing the same outside the gate, reconfiguring entrance points as a jagged pattern rather than the straight line that exists now.

Gate 34 now will have 16 entrance points, up from 12, along with the same single wheelchair entrance, said Matt Hoy, senior vice president of operations. The Twins also plan to erect a canopy about 25 feet wide over all gates to shield metal detectors, ticket-scanning machines and people from the weather.

“We’re trying to create a better experience for guests coming in the door,” Hoy said. “We’ve been sensitive so we don’t create a big concrete monolith of the space.”

The Minnesota Ballpark Authority (MBA), which oversees the complex, has approved the project.

“For the MBA, we wanted to maintain the open feel of the plaza and avoid the use of temporary fencing or tents on game days,” MBA Executive Director Dan Kenney said. “The new layout had to maintain public access to and through the plaza at all times.”

The Gold Glove was placed in Target Plaza when the ballpark opened in 2010 as a nod to the Twins’ top fielders. Sitting on an 18-inch platform, it was designed to be decorative. “It wasn’t originally intended to be used as a photo op,” Hoy said.

But now it will not only be moved about 100 feet toward downtown, but also lowered to better accommodate the demands of snapshot all-stars.

A matter of security

The Twins also are adding security measures, because the world has changed since 2010. The team, along with all of Major League Baseball, is moving slowly toward full NFL-level security.

The team added magnetometers in 2014 before the All-Star Game. Except for concerts, they haven’t yet limited bag sizes like the NFL does.

Moving fans quickly through the gate isn’t just about convenience — it’s critical to security.

“Any time you have crowds gathering on the exterior of a building, it’s an opportunity” for an attack, Hoy said.

In a less ominous vein, more mundane changes are in the works that won’t be seen by fans, such as the addition of storage space in the bowels of the building. Such space is highly coveted at both Target Field and the two-year-old U.S. Bank Stadium.

The Twins also are adding a new lawn inside Gate 34, laying down more than 5,800 square feet of turf.

“If your kids are getting impatient in the fifth inning or so, you can have them out there running around,” Hoy said, adding that the space could be used for impromptu whiffle ball games and other amusements: “I don’t want to do too much to distract them. You can still get a home run ball out there.”

And the team plans to install a permanent “multipurpose shell” inside Gate 34, with glass doors and a fabric canopy, that might be used for all sorts of activities such as autograph signings, a pop-up store, beer hall or concert.

In all, the gate line will take up an additional 9,000 square feet of the plaza. That leaves roughly 68,600 square feet on the public plaza over Interstate 394.

The Twins also plan changes on the plaza outside the ballpark, moving and replacing some planters with a permanent bench.

Kansas City-based architect Populous was working out the final details on the plan, which Hoy insists will not change the welcoming nature of the ballpark or the amount of greenery in the area.

Twins will give Joe Mauer time before discussing a new role for him
Judd Zulgad | 1500 ESPN | November 14, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Joe Mauer’s playing days might be over, but it sounds as if his connection with the Twins won’t be coming to an end.

The St. Paul native said during his retirement press conference on Monday at Target Field that he “definitely wants to be connected” to the franchise.

“This organization has been a family to me,” Mauer said. “In what capacity my role (will be) going forward, I’m not sure. There probably will be some conversations hopefully down the road. Kind of have the same mentality as my playing days. Whatever I can do to help this team, this organization, get better I’d definitely be open to that.”

Twins president Dave St. Peter said the organization will give Mauer some time before addressing a role for him going forward. The Twins have worked hard to keep their alumni involved in a variety of positions.

“I think it comes down to a dialogue with Joe about what he aspires to do in the game,” St. Peter said, “and I don’t think Joe’s looking for a ceremonial role. I think my sense of it is that he’s going to look for a role that maybe can help impact our club on the field and our players within our farm system and help us win. That’s a dialogue that will take place with Joe going forward.

“I think we will give it some time. I think our recommendation in these circumstances always is to give guys a little bit of time to get away from the grind of the season and of the game and then maybe have more of a clear mind to kind of think about what they want to do. But we have interest in that for all kinds of reasons. We think Joe has something to add, and we know the respect he carries inside our clubhouse and really throughout our system.”

The Twins employ several former players as special assistants to baseball operations, including Justin Morneau, Torii Hunter, LaTroy Hawkins and Michael Cuddyer. The three have worked with players in spring training and Morneau, Hunter and Hawkins also do television work for the Twins on Fox Sports North.

The soft-spoken Mauer would be considered a long shot to ever do television work, but certainly could work with players.

“I think that’s up for discussion but certainly Derek (Falvey, the Twins’ chief baseball officer) and Thad (Levine, the Twins’ general manager) are going to have a lot of input on that,” St. Peter said. “But I don’t think that’s impossible. And there’s no doubt that Joe’s going to continue to be very active from a community perspective, and we’re going to continue to do everything we can to support those efforts.”

Paul Molitor “enjoying some down time,” unsure of future in baseball
Judd Zulgad | 1500 ESPN | November 14, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Paul Molitor returned to Target Field on Monday for Joe Mauer’s retirement announcement after being fired as the Twins’ manager in early October. So what is the Hall of Famer planning to do next?

“I’m enjoying some down time,” Molitor said. “It’s been good.”

Molitor was offered the chance to remain with the Twins in a baseball operations capacity, but whether he works for the team he’s going to get paid. He had two years remaining on the three-year contract the Twins gave him after he led the team to a berth in the American League wild card game in 2017. Molitor reportedly is still owed \$3.25 million.

The 62-year-old Molitor, who managed the Twins to a 305-343 record in four seasons, said he doesn’t have anything going on yet in terms of finding a job in baseball, adding, “it’s kind of quiet in that department.”

Molitor said he “didn’t really have any desire” to throw his hat in the ring for a job with another organization. “I’ve had a few conversations here, but not very substantive as of yet,” he said. “I don’t think anybody feels any urgency, me or them, but we’ll keep talking. See if something makes sense.”

Asked if he might take a year off, Molitor said: “It’s possible. (I’ll) let the calendar turn and we’ll see what January brings.”

Joe Mauer was fearful concussion suffered in May might end career
Judd Zulgad | 1500 ESPN | November 14, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Joe Mauer’s career was derailed by concussions that forced him to move from catcher to first base after the 2013 season. It was believed that moving from behind the plate meant Mauer would be free of the worry that went with continually taking foul tips off his mask and the concussions that occurred as a result.

But ultimately even at was believed to be the safety of first base, Mauer could not avoid the brain injury which can prove to be so devastating and which, unlike so many other injuries, is completely unpredictable.

Mauer found this out in May when he retreated to chase a foul pop-up in a game at Anaheim and snapped his head as he fell to the ground. Routine play, right? The Twins initially were hesitant to call Mauer’s injury a concussion, but it soon became clear that’s exactly what it was and that Mauer again had to deal with the unknown. He was forced to stay away from Target Field to allow his brain time to heal and missed 25 games.

He also began to think about a future beyond being a big-league player.

Mauer, who will turn 36 in April, announced Monday what we had all known was coming since his emotional farewell game to end the season. He was retiring after 15 seasons.

“I don’t know,” Mauer said when asked if he would be calling it quits if he hadn’t suffered that last concussion. “I’m not sure. I think that definitely opened my eyes a little bit. Brought me back to 2013 and a lot of the struggles that I had faced.”

Mauer’s last game as a catcher — unless you include the pitch he caught in ceremonial fashion from Matt Belisle in his last game on Sept. 30 — came on Aug. 19, 2013 in a makeup game against the New York Mets at Target Field. Mauer took several foul tips off the mask that day, but the real damage was done when Ike Davis’ foul hit Mauer on the top of his catching helmet with so much force that the ball ended up going over the backstop. Mauer did not play again that season.

Mauer was never the same player after that and when he sustained the concussion in Anaheim, and the symptoms came back, he wondered if he could finish out the season before having to call it quits.

“I worked so hard to get back to playing and finishing this year out, and I’m thankful I was able to do that and that play wasn’t the end,” he said. “But it made me think and obviously (the) doctors made me aware of the risk. But when it happened it made me a little more aware.”

Mauer said his concern was again dealing with “the unknown,” adding, “not knowing when you try to ride a bike that everything is going to be OK. That’s what is so difficult with concussions. It’s different for everyone and through my experience at that time I wasn’t sure if I was able come back and do what I love. I was thankful I was able to do that and finish this season out on a strong note.”

Paul Molitor, who was fired as Twins manager after this past season, also was concerned about Mauer given the Hall of Famer had never previously dealt with this type of situation.

“I think when that was going on I hadn’t really had to deal with any player whose symptoms were as potentially severe in terms of limitations when it first occurred and the fact it actually went backwards,” Molitor said. “The first day or two we were kind of encouraged and then it got worse.

“There’s just so much unpredictability with case-to-case with those situations, and I didn’t know where it was going. I just really tried to allow Joe — as well as our medical people — to let him be the guide about coming back and then we started to see a little bit of sign that it might be heading in the right direction. Thankfully, once he did get back we didn’t have to take a step back. So (it was) kind of meant to be that he got out there those last few months or whatever it was.”

Mauer went on the disabled list after a May 18 game against Milwaukee and did not return until mid-June.

Mauer had told reporters in spring training that he was hoping to sign a new contract with the Twins after his eight-year, \$184 million expired following the season. “That really was my mindset,” he said. “It’s just over the course of a Major League season things happen and you make adjustments.

Mauer, who finished his career as a .306 hitter, hit .282/.351/.379 with six home runs and 48 RBIs in 127 games this season. There was little doubt he could have played another year or two, but with a third child on the way this month Mauer’s long-term well being became the most important thing.

Mauer's good friend and former teammate, Justin Morneau, also battled concussion issues that sidetracked his career and had long ago become someone Mauer could rely on to listen and give guidance.

"We had a lot of conversations about it and going through when you feel better, when you start to feel better," Morneau said. "It's hard because it's such a personal thing. Each person experiences something different when they go through it. I think the unknown is the toughest part and most frustrating part. But to know you're going to get better at some point and you don't know when that's going to be. It can wear on you."

Morneau's first concussion came in a 2010 game at Toronto when he slid into the knee of Blue Jays shortstop John McDonald while breaking up a double play. Morneau, like Mauer, was never the same player and in 2015 the first baseman suffered another concussion diving for a ball.

"I can't speak for him but it's hard to play with fear," Morneau said. "As a young player you're fearless and you don't think about the consequences. You dive for every ball, you run into every wall. You kind of go through that and all of a sudden reality kicks in and you look up and you've got kids at home and you've got people depending on you. You want to be able to enjoy that."

"You work so hard to live this dream but when it's done if you can't remember anything that's going on what's the point? You want to be able to have those memories, you want to be able to spend that quality time with your family, you want to be around for them and I think in the end that helps make the decision a lot easier."

Mauer admitted that he began to seriously consider making 2018 his final season after that last concussion.

"Obviously as you become a parent and your family starts growing it puts a lot of things in perspective," he said. "I wanted to take time (to make the decision). It was so emotional for me that second half of the season and I wanted to take time to separate a lot of those things. ... Let things calm down a little bit and make sure the daily grind (wasn't) making my decision and I've done that. I've taken the time that I needed to take and I feel 100 percent behind my decision. I'm excited for that next chapter. ... I feel like this is the best plan not only for me but for my family. I'm happy about that."