

Rose reinstatement could pave way for Jackson, Weaver and others

In 2005, Obama requested probe of Weaver suspension

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Posted on Thursday, July 30th

If Pete Rose were to be welcomed back to Major League Baseball in the days ahead, then should the olive branch also be extended to Joe Jackson, Buck Weaver and others?

Longtime baseball fans and historians undoubtedly asked themselves that question in wake of several media reports that commissioner Bud Selig has seriously considered a pardon for Rose, who was banned for life because of his baseball-related gambling activities as Cincinnati Reds manager 20 years ago.

Former all-time home run king Hank Aaron is chief among those who have lobbied on the behalf of Rose in recent years. Rose has never appeared on the Hall of Fame ballot despite his 4,256 career hits, a major league record, and Aaron believes that his induction is overdue. Selig has immense respect for Aaron, who finished his career with the Milwaukee Brewers, the franchise that Selig owned for 23 years before he assumed his current role.

The Rose situation is sure to be monitored closely by the many supporters of Jackson and Weaver, the former White Sox players who received lifetime suspensions because of their roles in the 1919 Black Sox scandal.

In 1920, commissioner Keneshaw Mountain Landis also banished Eddie Cicotte, Oscar (Happy) Felsch, Arnold (Chick) Gandil, Fred McMullin, Charles (Swede) Risberg and Claude (Lefty) Williams for life because of their alleged involvement in the scheme. One year later, a Chicago jury acquitted all except McMullin, who was not tried because of a lack of evidence.

Weaver has the strongest case for reinstatement, because unlike the other accused parties, there is no evidence that he took part in the fix but only had knowledge of it. Nonetheless, even though White Sox manager Kid Gleason and team owner Charles Comiskey also had been tipped off beforehand, Weaver would never play another game because of his failure to alert the proper authorities.

Weaver requested hearings with various commissioners on six occasions prior to his death in January, 1956, but his pleas went ignored.

Decades later, a case can be made that Weaver did nothing worse than the hundreds of major leaguers who were aware of rampant steroids abuse but chose to remain silent about it.

"No figure has done less to be more punished more than Buck Weaver in the history of professional baseball," said Dr. David Fletcher, who started the Clear Buck campaign (www.clearbuck.com) to increase public awareness of the issue four years ago. "If Pete Rose is pardoned, then Weaver certainly deserves to be treated in a like manner. Otherwise, Major League Baseball will have established a double standard that does not serve the best interests of the game."

According to a highly placed league source, Selig is unlikely to reinstate Rose or any other player in a similar situation because of his reluctance to overturn a decision made by one of his predecessors. In August, 1989, commissioner Bart Giamatti reached an agreement with Rose that amounted to a lifetime suspension.

Selig could not be reached for comment on Wednesday.

Like Rose, Weaver has some clout of his own.

At the request of the Clear Buck campaign, in a letter dated Nov. 23, 2005, then Illinois Senator Barack Obama urged Selig "to conduct a posthumous investigation and hearing of the claims of Mr. Weaver's family and those interested Chicagoans and others who believe fervently that this honorable man was treated unjustly. I appreciate your consideration of this request."

On Dec. 6, 2005, Selig responded, "I certainly understand the great interest you have in the reinstatement of George Buck Weaver. As you know, none of my predecessors have seen fit to do so, but I have undertaken a very thorough investigation of this matter. These are very complex issues and very difficult to do proper research, although I am using our baseball historian, Jerome Holtzman of Evanston, Illinois, who is really the outstanding baseball historian of our generation.

"I can assure you that we will be very thorough in our review, and if there is anything you would like to discuss further about this matter, I would be delighted to do so. Although we have not met, I look forward to our paths crossing in the future."

In his role as the first Major League Baseball official historian, Holtzman was adamant that Weaver deserved to be exonerated in the matter.

"If anybody should be absolved, then it should be Buck Weaver more so than Joe Jackson or any of the others," Holtzman told me in January, 2008, six months before he passed away. "Jackson was guilty as hell, but Weaver was an innocent bystander. He just got caught up in it, that's all. Weaver should have spoken up. Of course, it would have been pretty difficult for him to speak up and betray his teammates."

While Jackson admitted to a \$5,000 reward, he maintained that it had no affect on his performance. He led the White Sox in batting average (.375), runs scored (five) and RBI (six) in the 1919 World Series, which his team lost against the underdog Reds in eight games.

If Jackson were to be pardoned and thus become eligible for Hall of Fame election, then his credentials would be difficult to ignore. Among the elite players of his time, he ranks third in batting average (.356) and 17th in on-base percentage (.423) in major league history.

Like Rose, Jackson would appear on the Veterans Committee ballot if he were to become eligible for Hall of Fame induction. In order to be elected, he would need the votes of at least 75 percent of the living Hall of Fame members, of whom there are 65 currently.

"Pete Rose and Joe Jackson are linked as the two greatest players and most tragic figures not in the Hall of Fame currently," Fletcher said. "If the Hall of Fame admits one of them, then it must admit the other."