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The Roman Cooperstown

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Forgive the Monday morning quarterbacking, but the entry of two new members of the Universal Church's Hall of Fame raises questions too enticing to ignore.

Given a chance to vote, rank and file fans would have enshrined John XXIII long ago. He led the 20th century papal league in every major category of wisdom and compassion, winning the affections of those who followed the game and those who didn't. His average was high and he had deceptive power. But an assortment of detractors, from high level execs in the sport's front office to the defenders of Vatican I, faulted him for sacrificing too much tradition, for being a players coach, as it were, and for letting the clubhouse range too far off the leash. Meanwhile, his successors' efforts to reverse those reforms seemed to delay John's placement on the ballot for many years.

By contrast, his companion on induction day, John Paul II, had the benefit of a passionate, well funded campaign from the moment he passed from the scene. Champion of anti-communism, determined to roll back "excesses" spurred by his fellow inductee and a magnetic presence that earned him a reputation for spreading the Word, he was proclaimed "The Great" almost as soon as the keys to the kingdom had passed hands.

So far so clear. But here's the debate that will inevitably go on. Does anyone tainted by the "child abuse" furor deserve a place in the Hall? While JP II's election might settle the controversy. Francis, the commissioner, parlayed the clamor for JP II's promotion as an opportunity to bring John along. John was never much a self-promoter, truth to tell, so it was a shrewd move.

Many think John should have been the shoo-in all along. And his election as a sort of compromise package avoids what serious students of the legacy see as the nagging question. For all his valiant leadership in the cause of restoring tradition, JP II is haunted by the "character" issue stemming from

some of his responses to the sex abuse crimes and his unstinting support of a particular fan club, the notorious Legionnaires of Christ. Those traits were passed over; one might imagine the outcome if he'd demanded the full inclusion of women in the league.

The commish has decided to go with the crowds on this one, allowing JP II quick entry and packaging him with John. The surprised joy among John's followers at least temporarily may quell the storm. But it may come back soon. Pius XII, now on the old timers list, is waiting in the wings.

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