Will Aroldis Chapman be a Hall of Famer?

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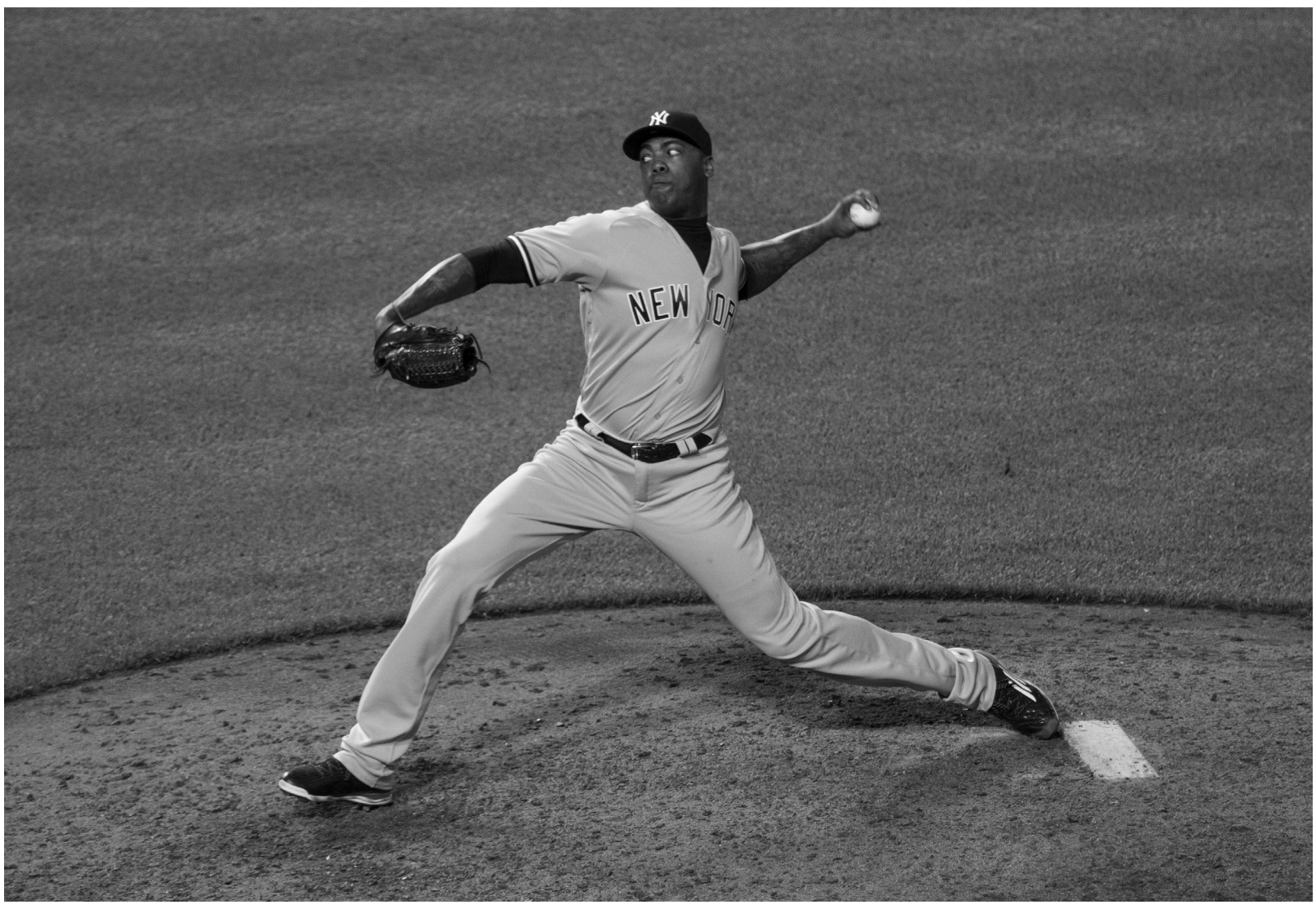

Aroldis Chapman pitches from the mound. Chapman's allegations of assault complicate his path to the Hall of Fame. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA

Content Warning: The following article contains mentions of domestic abuse.

The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum has been notoriously finicky when it comes to inducting relief pitchers.

Take Houston Astros great Billy Wagner, for example. The longtime closer is ranked eighth all-time with 422 career saves. It took Wagner the maximum 10 tries to get elected to Cooperstown.

Earlier this month, Boston Red Sox closer Aroldis Chapman became the ninth pitcher in MLB history to reach 400 career saves. Naturally, that also left him ninth on the all-time list, 22 away from tying Wagner at the time of writing.

Four of the eight players on the list ahead of him are Hall of Famers: Mariano Rivera, Trevor Hoffman, Lee Smith and Wagner. Another two, Craig Kimbrel and Kenley Jansen, are still active. Jansen, who currently sits at 494 career saves, seems likely to become the third pitcher in MLB history to reach 500 saves, along with Rivera and Hoffman.

Rivera is the most notable name on the list and had the most Hall of Fame success, becoming the first player to be unanimously inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2019. The all-time saves leader Rivera closed the door on 652 games en route to becoming a New York Yankees legend.

Hoffman, the only other player thus far to reach 600, also found relative Hall of Fame success, making it in on his third ballot.

Smith held the MLB saves record until Hoffman broke it in 2006 and was elected to the hall by the Today's Game Era Committee.

While the 38-year-old Chapman can still reach the upper 90s on his fastball, reaching even 500 career saves at this point in his career would be a tall task. 600 is seemingly out of the question. The most saves Chapman has ever recorded in a season is 38, which he did for both the 2012 and 2013 Cincinnati Reds. Notching saves at that pace; it would take Chapman more than five seasons past the current one to touch 600.

While Chapman won't have the save numbers that are generally required to get into the hall with ease, he will have something that no other reliever can boast.

On July 3, Chapman passed Hoyt Wilhelm for the most strikeouts by a reliever in MLB history. The left-hander currently has 1,396 for his career and is a real threat to be the first reliever to reach 1,500 strikeouts.

Wilhelm, who punched out 1,363 batters across a 21-year career, is a Hall of Famer. So is Goose Gossage, who is now third on the list at 1,340 strikeouts. Kimbrel and Jansen are fourth and fifth, respectively, while six through eight are Hall of Famers.

Based on the unique combination of strikeouts and saves, it seems likely that Chapman would be inducted somewhere in the middle of Hoffman and Wagner's timelines when considering just the stats.

However, stats are not the only thing the Baseball Writers' Association of America considers when creating their ballots. Enter the fabled character clause, the small detail buried in BBWAA election rules that has kept suspected steroid users and media villains out of the hall for decades.

Rule five states that "voting shall be based upon the player's record, playing ability, integrity, sportsmanship, character and contributions to the team(s) on which the player played."

The second to last attribute is the one referred to in the character clause.

Prior to the start of the 2016 season, Chapman became the first player ever penalized by MLB under their Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse policy, according to an article by Paul Hagen and Bryan Hoch of MLB.com.

The suspension stemmed from an incident in which Chapman allegedly choked his 22-year-old girlfriend and fired eight shots with a handgun in his garage, according to Hagen and Hoch. Prosecutors decided not to prosecute Chapman, citing conflicting accounts and insufficient evidence that would have made a conviction unlikely, according to Hoch.

Still, the league imposed a punishment on Chapman, who was suspended for 30 games at the start of the 2016 season before being traded by the Yankees to the Chicago Cubs, where he won his first of two World Series.

Though Chapman was the first punished under the new agreement, there is some precedent for how Hall of Fame voters have reacted to domestic violence-related allegations.

Shortstop Omar Vizquel recorded 2,877 hits and won 11 Gold Gloves across a 24-year career.

On Dec. 16, 2020, Katie Strang and Ken Rosenthal of the Athletic reported in an article that Major League Baseball was investigating domestic abuse allegations made against Vizquel by his wife Blanca, who had filed for divorce, according to the article. The league also investigated a 2019 incident allegedly involving Vizquel and a male employee of the Birmingham Barons, the Double-A team which Vizquel was managing that season, according to Strang and Rosenthal.

From his first year of eligibility in 2018, the percentage of voters who voted for Vizquel grew for three straight seasons. Vizquel received his highest percentage of votes in 2020, 52.6%. Voting for the 2021 class was due on Dec. 31, 2020, less than two weeks after the allegations were reported. Vizquel's percentage of voters that season dropped slightly to 49.1%.

The 2022 vote was the first indication that off-the-field allegations were impacting Vizquel's voting results, as only 23.9% of voters included Vizquel on their ballot that year. That number hasn't gotten back above 20% since dropping below that mark in 2023. 2027 will be the final year that Vizquel is eligible.

While the specific details of the two respective alleged incidents have clear differences, the trends in Vizquel's voting results have widely been associated with the allegations and been attributed to the character clause.

As such, there is a possibility that Chapman's 2016 suspension may stand as a barrier for some voters when the reliever's time on the ballot does come.



Omar Vizquel jogs across the field. Allegations made against Vizquel impacted his Hall of Fame votes.
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