

Pete Rose, all-time hitter banned by baseball for gambling, dies at 83

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Pete Rose, the most prolific hitter in the history of American baseball, died at his Las Vegas home at the age of 83 on September 30. The Las Vegas coroner indicated his death was the result of a serious heart condition.

Rose's last public appearance was just the day before his death when he appeared at a sports memorabilia show in Nashville, Tennessee while in a wheel chair. While long banned from any official connection to Major League Baseball because of a gambling addiction, he remained popular with fans.

Rose was born April 14, 1941, in Cincinnati, Ohio. His father, Harry, was a bank teller, who played semipro football on weekends, and served as an inspiration to young Pete with his intensity, and he followed his dad into sports, playing high school football and baseball, making up in determination for what he lacked in size and natural ability.

Out of high school Rose was not considered to be a major league prospect. One early scouting report on him said, "Can't hit, can't throw, can't run." Rose, however, had an uncle who had some influence with the hometown Cincinnati Reds and convinced them in 1960 to sign him to a minor league contract.

Rose, an excellent contact hitter, lacked power and speed, but made up for it by playing significantly harder than most other players. By 1963 he became the starting second baseman for the Reds. His style of play earned Rose the nickname "Charlie Hustle" and quickly made him a fan favorite for his all-out, all-the-time effort.

By the time Rose's 24-year career came to an end in 1986 he had become MLB's all-time leader in hits, games played, at bats, singles, and outs. He was Rookie of the Year, won three World Series championships, three batting titles, two Golden Glove Awards, and one Most Valuable Player Award. He also made 17 All-Star appearances at an unequaled five different positions: first base, second base, third base, left field and right field.

Rose's legendary accomplishments on the field were marred, however, by a gambling addiction that led him to bet on baseball.

Baseball has a longstanding rule prohibiting gambling, known as Rule 21, which is prominently displayed in every MLB clubhouse. It states any player, umpire, or club or league official or employee who bets "upon any baseball game in connection with which the bettor has a duty to perform, shall be declared permanently ineligible."

This rule was implemented in response to the "Black Sox" scandal of 1919 in which eight members of the Chicago White Sox were accused of intentionally losing the World Series that year in exchange for payments from gamblers.

During his playing career Rose was well known at horse tracks, and betting on horses was a habit he developed as a youth when he would regularly accompany his father to the horse races.

After his last seasons with the Reds as a player-manager—the last player to combine those duties—Rose continued as manager after retiring as a player. It was during this period that more stories began to emerge that Rose had been betting on baseball.

In early 1989, Rose was questioned informally by National League President Bartlett Giamatti and Commissioner of Baseball Peter Ueberroth about these reports. Rose admitted betting on the horses, football, and basketball but vehemently denied betting on baseball.

On March 21, 1989, *Sports Illustrated* published a detailed report of the allegations that Rose had been placing bets on baseball games. Lawyer John M. Dowd was appointed to investigate these charges, and documented Rose's gambling activities in 1985 and 1986 and compiled a day-by-day account of his alleged betting on baseball games in 1987, with bets of thousands of dollars a day.

On August 24, 1989, after various legal maneuvers by Rose failed, he voluntarily accepted a permanent place on baseball's ineligible list, meaning that he could no longer be employed in any capacity by baseball or take part in any of its official events. Rose accepted that there was a factual reason for the ban. In return, MLB agreed to make no formal finding with regard to the gambling allegations.

The Hall of Fame, however, is independent of MLB and at the time had no prohibitions on admitting players who were otherwise qualified based on their accomplishments and contributions to the game. Based on his accomplishments on the field Rose was extraordinarily well qualified to be admitted to baseball's Hall of Fame.

In 1991, however, eighteen months after Rose was banned from baseball and the same year Rose would have been first eligible for the Hall of Fame, its directors voted to exclude individuals on baseball's permanently ineligible list. This new rule prevented Rose from ever being admitted to the Hall of Fame.

The rule was adopted right after Rose had completed a five-month prison sentence for tax evasion. He had previously pled guilty to failing to report income from his gambling winnings and selling of his autographs and baseball memorabilia.

In the ensuing decade Rose made repeated unsuccessful requests to be reinstated and steadfastly continued to deny he ever bet on baseball. In early 2004, however, he admitted in his autobiography, *My Prison Without Bars*, and in subsequent interviews that he had indeed bet on baseball games while playing for and managing the Reds. He also admitted to betting on Reds games, but said he never bet against his team.

Rose also indicated that he hoped his "confessions" would help him get reinstated so he could be in the Hall of Fame. "What, are they waiting for me to die?" Rose repeatedly would say of his chances of getting into the Hall of Fame. "Wouldn't that be horrible if I died next week and then next year they reinstated me?"

Pete Rose to say the least was a complex and contradictory figure. Major League Baseball made much of him during his playing career but adopted a hostile and hypocritical stance to the exposure of Rose's gambling problems. While insisting on lifetime banishment of the sport's most prolific hitter, the same officials turned a blind eye to the steroid era (1994-2004) as inflated home runs resulted in increased revenues.

In 2017, the Houston Astros were involved in an illegal sign stealing scheme that many feel enabled them to win the World Series, yet no players were suspended or

banned. Rose claimed that his gambling never affected the outcome of a game, while steroids and illegal sign stealing did, yet he is the one who was banned.

Moreover, sports gambling has now been legalized in many states, and is commonplace on line, and has become a principal source of revenue for all major sports. Sports broadcasts feature commercials promoting various gambling services with prominent players serving as paid spokesmen. It is estimated according to Forbes that MLB is earning more than \$1 billion annually from its business relationships and licensing agreements with casinos and gambling outlets.

Because of all of these developments and changes that have impacted baseball since Rose was banned, public support for his admission to the Hall of Fame had significantly increased and many fans as well as players had campaigned in recent years for his admittance.

The debate as to whether Rose should be in the Hall of Fame will probably increase now that he is dead and will continue to revolve around what impact, if any, did his gambling have on his extraordinary performance on the field.

Perhaps longtime broadcaster Bob Costas best summed up the contradictory views of Rose when he observed, "somebody got those 4,256 base hits and those three batting championships. Put him in the Hall of Fame, put it at the bottom of his plaque 'banned from baseball 1989, for life'. It's part of the record, but he should be in as a player."



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