

# Big-hitting trio Hall of Fame-bound

**Dan Schlossberg**

Special to USA TODAY

lined for 1,529 home runs, 22 All-Star selections and two MVP awards.

"They were big guys," says Jeff Torborg, who managed five big-league teams, including Guerrero's Expos. "Vladi, because he was so rangy, you didn't realize how big a guy he was. Thome was massive, like a pro football player, solid and thick, he could generate bat speed."

## Pride of the Braves

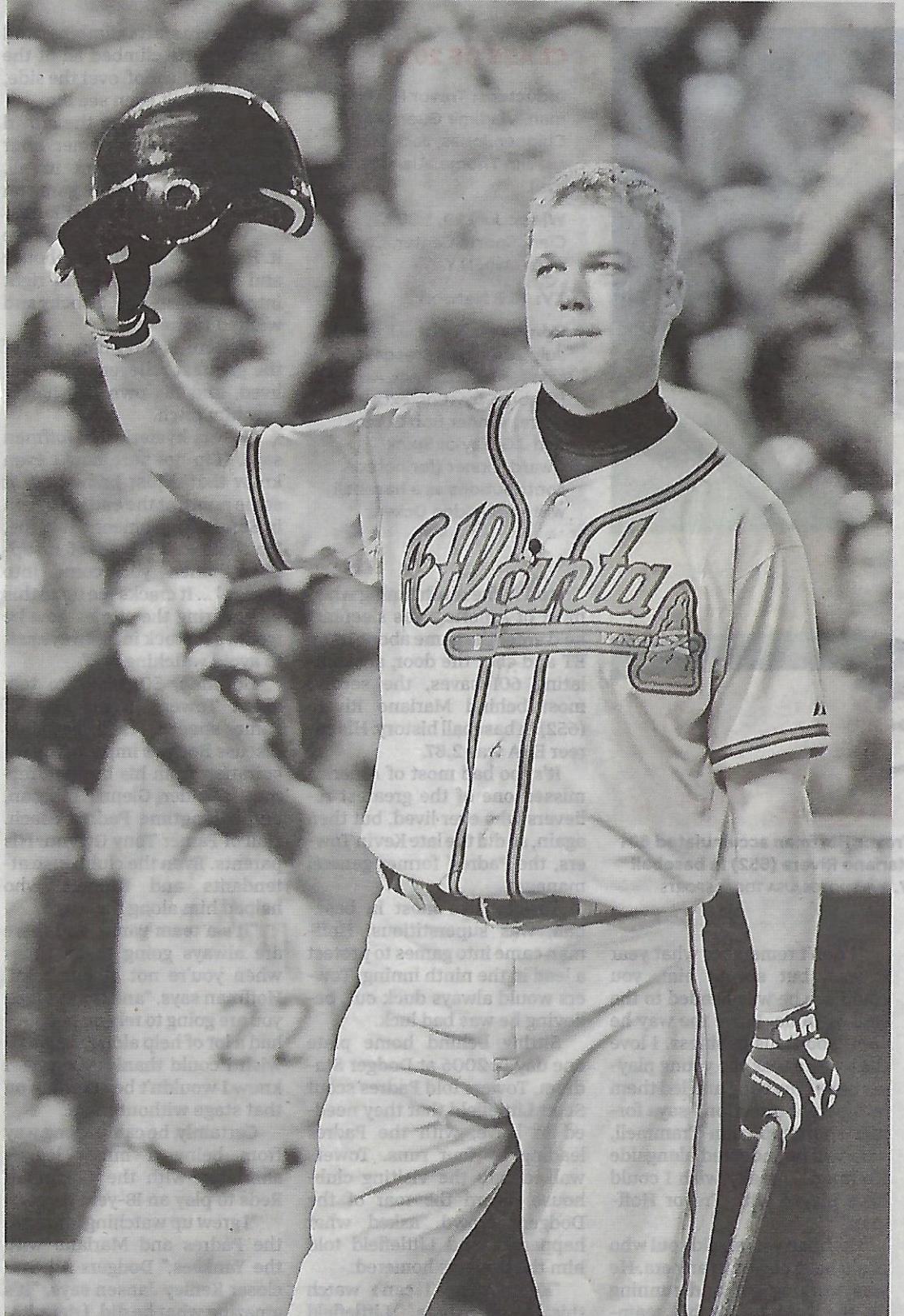
Jones, who was 6-4 and 210 pounds, grew up in Florida idolizing fellow shortstops Cal Ripken, Jr. and Ozzie Smith. He became a switch-hitter at the behest of his dad, Larry Wayne Jones, Sr., a Mickey Mantle fan.

A switch-hitting teammate eventually became Chipper's mentor. "Terry Pendleton was the guy who helped me the most," says Jones of Pendleton, who also won a batting crown and MVP award with the Braves. "He was part of a long line of great Braves third basemen from Mathews to Darrell Evans, Bob Horner, Terry, and myself."

Jones hit a career-best 45 home runs, a record for an NL switch-hitter later tied by Lance Berkman, after adopting suggestions from Don Baylor, the Braves' hitting coach in 1999. But his dad was always the go-to guy when Chipper's swing turned stale.

"Nobody knew my swing better than Pops," he said. "I could talk to people but Pops would come in, give me 10 swings in the cage, and fix it. I'm a visual guy, a visual learner, and Dad and I had the same philosophy, the same understanding, of how to get things fixed."

As a result, he became the only player to produce a pair of two-homer games against Ran-



Atlanta

During the 18 years Chipper Jones spent in the major leagues, entirely with the Atlanta Braves, his team won 428 more games than it lost. Only Derek Jeter, eligible for Cooperstown two years from now, made a bigger impact, with the Yankees 554 games on the plus side during his run.

This year's top vote-getter with 97.2 percent, Jones will join Ken Griffey Jr. as the only Hall of Famer who were No. 1 overall draft choices. He will also join Eddie Mathews as a third baseman who powered his way to Cooperstown with the Braves.

"He was more of an all-around ballplayer than Eddie was," says Hank Aaron, who teamed with Mathews to hit a record 863 home runs as teammates. "Chipper could play second, short, and the outfield but Eddie had to work at it."

Aaron was Atlanta's farm director when Jones signed in 1990 after pitcher Todd Van Poppel spurned the ballclub. "I always preferred taking a hitter over a pitcher," Aaron says. "I went to see Van Poppel pitch but his dad told me he was not going to sign with the Braves."

That worked out well, as Jones became the team leader, winning a World Series ring as a rookie in 1995, taking National League MVP honors four years later, and helping Atlanta to a record 14 consecutive division titles (the last 11 with Jones).

"He was the key cog in many ways," says John Schuerholz, general manager throughout the streak. "He was always ready for big moments."

Jones has the lone World Series ring among this weekend's hitting inductions to the National Baseball Hall of Fame. But

Trammell, elected by the Modern Baseball Era Committee, spent their careers with one club.

"It was a perfect marriage between player and organization," says Jones, 46. "I'm a Southern kid who grew up in the South. My friends and family are here. The Atlanta Braves and all their farm teams are here. And it doesn't get any better than playing for Bobby Cox."

Jones is the sixth Brave in the last five years to win election to Cooperstown.

"When I was inducted last year," Schuerholz recalls with a laugh, "Wade Boggs came up to me at a social event and said, 'We're going to have to build a special wing for the Atlanta Braves. You have so many people inducted every year that we're going to run out of space.' I said, 'That's OK with me, Wade.'

Cox and pitchers Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine went into Cooperstown in 2014, followed by John Smoltz a year later, Schuerholz in 2017 and Jones this year.

## Power and patience

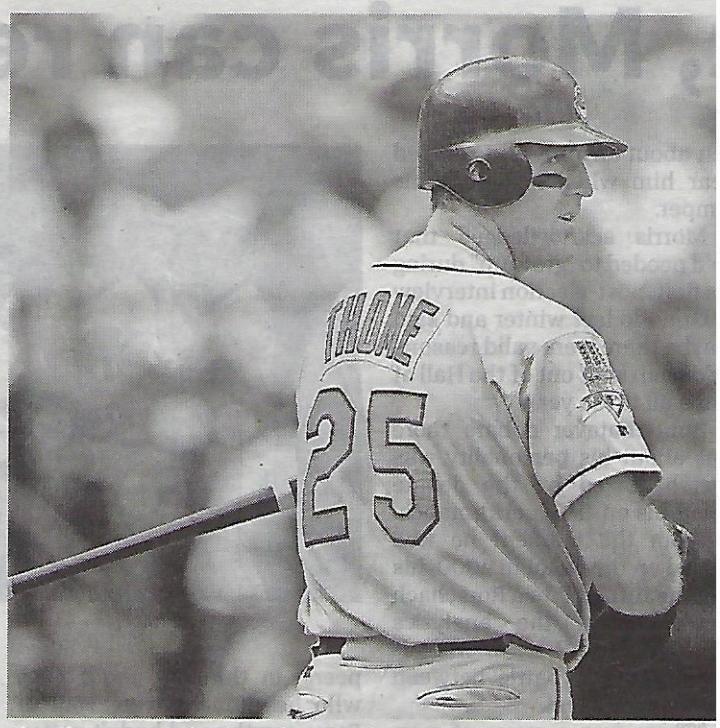
Like Jones, Thome was a skinny shortstop who became a slugging corner infielder. And he had a lifetime on-base percentage of .402, a point better than Jones.

He grew into a 6-4, 250-pound big-leaguer who smashed 612 homers in the regular season (an average of 39 per 162 games) and 17 more in postseason play. A record 13 of Thome's home runs were game-enders, including his 500th in 2007.

Four years later, he hit his 599th and 600th in consecutive at-bats.

"I hit my 599th against Rick Porcello and took the ball into my locker," he says. "I had a moment to myself and thought, 'This is for real now, I'm one away.' I didn't have much time to think about it because I hit again in the next inning. I hit a ball out to left-center against Daniel Schlereth and my dad, my wife and my kids came onto the field to celebrate."

"I didn't think about the Hall of Fame right away but I did think about all the great names



Jim Thome smashed 612 homers in the regular season (an average of 39 per 162 games). H. DARR BEISER/USA TODAY SPORTS

who hit 600 before I did."

Thome lasted 22 seasons, longest of the three hitters elected this year by the writers, but spent the bulk of his tenure in Cleveland, including pennant-winners in 1995 and 1997. He was with the White Sox in 2008 when his solo home run was the only run scored in the American League Central tiebreaker against Minnesota.

Myriad injuries probably kept him from reaching the rare air of 700 home runs. He finished eighth on the all-time list.

"I don't look back and say what could have been," says Thome, a left-handed slugger whose 52-homer campaign of 2002 gave him a club-record 334 for the Indians. "I feel lucky I played as long as I did, on great teams with great managers and teammates. It's an honor to be recognized but the main goal is to try and win a championship."

The product of a family that excelled in softball, Thome had a love for baseball took root early. As a boy, the Illinois native jumped into the Cubs dugout before a game at Wrigley Field in search of Dave Kingman's autograph.

"I was 9 or 10 years old," Thome recalls. "Barry Foote carried me out. Looking back, I don't

really think (Kingman) even heard me."

Eddie Murray, later his teammate in Cleveland, was his favorite player. "He had great presence," Thome says of his fellow Hall of Fame first baseman. "He never got too high or too low. When he spoke, you listened. Late in my own career, wanted to be that kind of teammate too."

Thome led the American League in walks three times, pushing his career on-base percentage 126 points higher than his batting average (.276).

"I'm very proud of that," he says. "As a guy who struck out a lot and hit home runs, a good on-base percentage means you're getting on base. The old cliché says a walk is as good as a hit. If you're on base, the guy behind you can drive you in."

Thome struggled against tough left-handers Randy Johnson and Jesse Orosco but persevered primarily because of help from Charlie Manuel, his manager in both Cleveland and Philadelphia.

"I can't imagine where I would have been without him," says Thome of Manuel. "He meant a lot to my career. Charlie was special in so many ways: his style, his demeanor, his ap-



**Vladimir Guerrero twice stole 30 bases and hit 30 homers in the same season.**

BARBARA JEAN GERMANO

proach, and his work ethic for starters."

The five-time All-Star reached postseason play 10 times but was often overshadowed on his own team by Albert Belle and Manny Ramirez. Thome, 47, never won an MVP but did get a distinctive honor two years ago: a statue that stands outside Progressive Field in Cleveland.

### **The art of bad-ball hitting**

Guerrero, did something the others in the Class of '18 didn't: he stole 30 bases and hit 30 homers in the same season ... twice.

"I wanted to run more," he says, "but Felipe Alou was protecting me long-term. He wanted to keep my bat in the lineup and not risk me getting hurt on the bases."

"He was my first big-league manager. He took a chance on a young kid in 1997 and let me know when to get my work in, how to be disciplined, and how to behave off the field. Things I do now are influenced by Felipe Alou."

Thanks to the input of the first Dominican manager, Guerrero, a 6-3, 235-pound right-handed hitter, became the first Dominican position player to reach Cooperstown.

His boyhood hero was Pedro Guerrero, not a blood relative

but a fellow Dominican slugger who powered his team to a pennant. According to Vladimir, who followed Pedro through newspapers that covered Dominican winter league games, "Pedro was a pure power hitter who was a big influence on the island."

So were Juan Marichal and Pedro Martinez, pitchers who became the first Dominicans to reach Cooperstown.

Another Hall of Fame pitcher, Randy Johnson, remembers Guerrero well.

"You couldn't put him away with a bad pitch," says Johnson, the most recent 300-game winner. "Chipper took me deep a little more but Vlad was a very difficult out. I don't think any pitcher could get him out other than throwing a strike and letting him get himself out."

Torborg agrees.

"When I was (in Montreal) for four months in 2001," he says, "Vlad was the star. He was such a total player, with an arm like Roberto Clemente and an unbelievable ability to hit pitches out of the strike zone. When I left and went to the Marlins, I didn't know how to get him out."

Guerrero, a nine-time All-Star, took the art of bad-ball hitting to an extreme. Honing his skills as a youth playing la placa, a game similar to cricket, he learned to hit balls that bounced, pitches over his head and others that seemed far out of reach. Yet he never fanned 100 times in a season.

"He was our best-kept secret," Torborg says. "The minute he got to Anaheim, where enthusiastic crowds cheered his every move, he won an MVP award (2004). He finished with a .318 batting average, topping the hitters in the Class of 2018 and 449 home runs. In 10 of his 12 seasons in which he played at least 140 games, he reached triple digits in RBI."

Guerrero, 43, is still laboring in obscurity, with Hall of Fame electors failing to give him the needed 75 per cent of the vote when he first graced the ballot in 2017. This season, he had a convincing 92.9 percent and putting him on the same team with Chipper Jones and Jim Thome, both first-ballot selections, for the first time.