

# Mauer, Helton were one-team heroes

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Special to USA TODAY

Since the advent of baseball free agency in 1976 allowed athletes to pick their own teams, only a handful of players have spent their whole careers with just one.

That idea is especially true among Hall of Famers of the Free Agent Era, including such luminaries as Derek Jeter, Chipper Jones and Cal Ripken Jr.

Joe Mauer and Todd Helton, two of the four members of the Cooperstown Class of 2024, are now among them.

Helton, Mauer, Adrian Beltré and former manager Jim Leyland will be inducted at Clark Sports Center in Cooperstown on July 21.

Less than a year after he played his last game in 2018, the Twins retired Mauer's No. 7 – the biggest honor he received before getting the call from Cooperstown.

"Getting into the Hall of Fame is not a goal you set when you go out on the field every day," he said. "Your goal is, 'What can I do to help my team win tonight?'"

Mauer, born and raised in neighboring St. Paul, stayed in the Twin Cities when he went from high school to the big leagues. Only a 277-game tenure in the minors interrupted that baseball odyssey.

A Twins fan who rooted for Kirby Buckett and Kent Hrbek during his days at Cretin-Derham High School, Mauer was a three-sport star who not only attracted a slew of suitors from colleges seeking quarterbacks but also a crowd of baseball scouts seeking to sign the promising young backstop.

He thus became the second player from his high school to turn pro without leaving home. Paul Molitor, part of the Hall's Class of 2004, was the first.

Helton, meanwhile, always felt at home at Coors Field and in Denver, his adopted home. USA TODAY Sports looks closer at Mauer and Helton, the two true hometown heroes of this year's Hall of Fame class.

**Mauer: Born to play baseball in Minnesota**

Thanks to their \$5.1 million signing



Todd Helton, left, looks at former Colorado Rockies teammate Larry Walker's plaque in January at the Baseball Hall of Fame. JON RATHBUN/USA TODAY NETWORK

bonus, the Twins won the bidding for Mauer, persuading him to sign over playing football at Florida State.

Mauer was actually much more than promising; he was such a generational talent that he won USA TODAY's High School Player of the Year honors in both baseball and football.

For the teenager Joe Mauer, choosing a sport was easy.

"Baseball was always my first love," he said. "I'd been playing it since I could walk."

The Twins had little hesitation making him the top overall pick in the 2001 amateur draft. Mauer had completed his high school career by hitting .605 with 15 home runs and 53 runs batted in during his senior year. He struck out only once in his high school career and never hit less than .500.

Coupled with coaching from his dad,

who devised a device for backyard batting practice, Mauer was on his way to becoming the only catcher in baseball history to win three batting titles. He won an MVP award too, in 2009.

By the time he retired after a 15-year tenure, he had six All-Star selections, five Silver Sluggers and three Gold Gloves in addition to the MVP trophy but missed a World Series ring when the Twins fell in the playoffs four times.

Mauer spent his last five seasons as a first baseman after suffering a severe concussion in August 2013. Earlier in his career, he missed time with a knee injury.

At 41, Mauer is less than half the age of some of the incumbent Hall of Famers who will sit behind him during the induction ceremonies at Clark Sports Center on July 21. He's also the youngest of the 346 members. In fact, he looks

## Baseball Hall of Fame Weekend

**When:** July 19-22

**Where:** Cooperstown, New York

**Inductees:** Adrian Beltré, Todd Helton, Joe Mauer (elected by Baseball Association of America); Jim Leyland (elected by Contemporary Baseball Committee).

**Ceremony:** Clark Sports Center, 1:30 p.m. July 21; **TV:** MLB Network

**Award winners:** Joe Castiglione (C. Frick Award for broadcasting); Tom Fraley (BBWAA Career Excellence winner)

like he could still play.

"I could have played another 10 years," said Mauer, who joined Benches and Pudge Rodriguez as catchers chosen for Cooperstown's first ballot, "but I felt it was time."

## Helton

Unlike Mauer, Helton had to wait awhile before earning the requisite 75% of the vote for enshrinement in the Hall of Fame. In his sixth year on the ballot, he wound up with 79.7%, over Mauer's 76.1% but far below the 95.1% of Beltré, also elected in 2024.

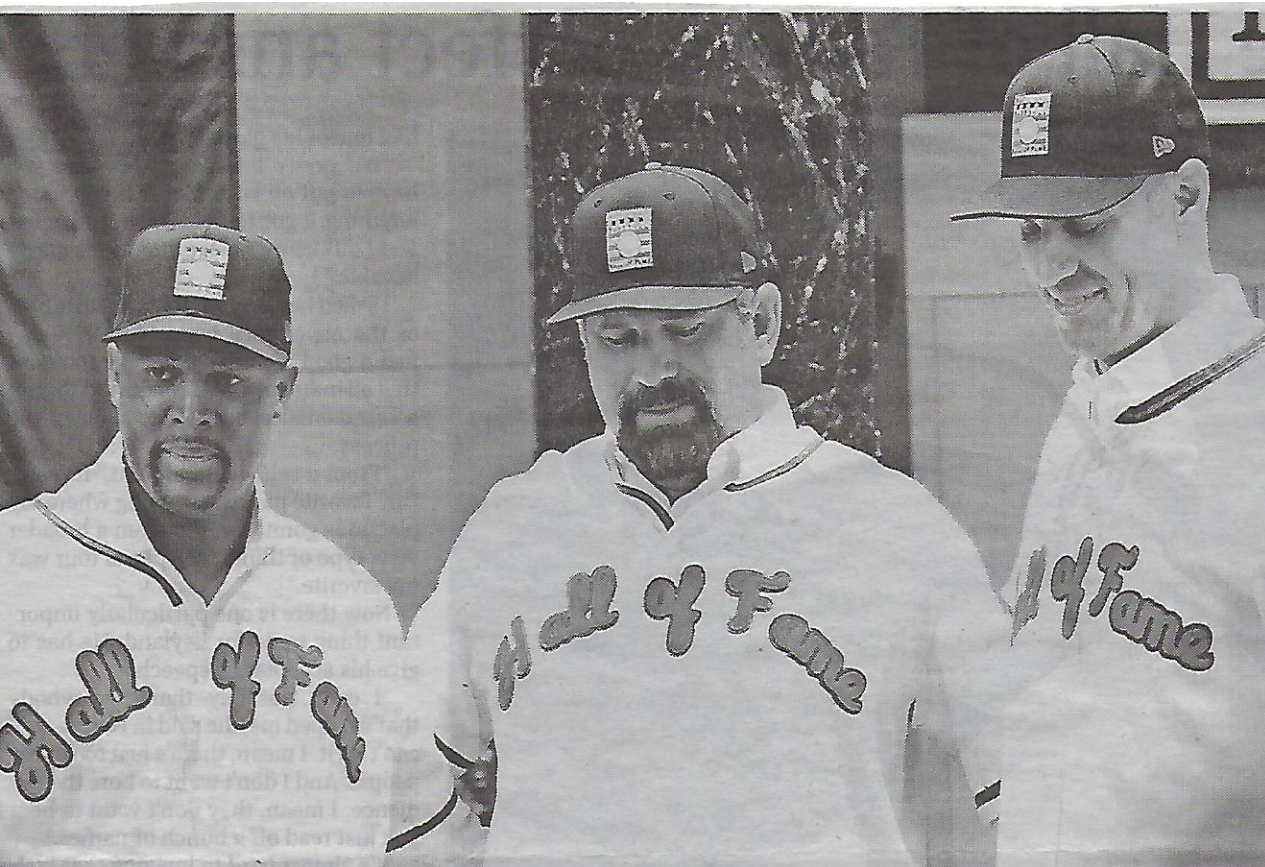
The Coors Field Factor helped Helton, whose numbers were artificially inflated by the altitude in Denver and the hitter-friendly Blake Street ballpark.

Helton never complained.

"I was very lucky to be drafted by Colorado," said the former first-round pick, who turned pro after accepting a signing bonus of \$892,000. "It was (Coors) a great place to hit. I got great fans and great people in the organization. It was a good life."

A five-time All-Star who won the Gold Gloves for his play at first base, Helton also had two seasons with at least 400 total bases – an elusive feat reached by longtime home run king Hank Aaron, the career leader





From left, Adrian Beltre, Todd Helton and Joe Mauer visited the National Baseball Hall of Fame's plaque gallery in Cooperstown in January. They will be inducted this weekend. JON RATHBUN/USA TODAY NETWORK

ases, only once.

By the time he retired after the 2013 campaign, Helton had more hits, home runs and RBIs than any other player in Colorado history. He also helped the Rockies win their only pennant, in 2007. "I enjoyed winning," said the Knoxville, Tennessee, native. "In 2007, every game we won or lost made a huge difference. It meant something."

Like Mauer, he was a schoolboy football star who became a professional baseball legend.

"I wanted to play baseball," said the one-time University of Tennessee gridiron great. "I didn't think I'd be an NFL quarterback anyway."

He perhaps could have been a precursor to Shohei Ohtani; Helton was a two-way ballplayer in college.

He could even have reached the big leagues sooner: the San Diego Padres drafted him in the amateur draft of 1992, the year before the Rockies joined the National League as an expansion entry.

Drafted again in 1995, the year the Rockies reached the playoffs for the first time, Helton made the majors two years later but had to play left field because

Andres Galarraga was anchored at first base. Only after The Big Cat left for Atlanta as a free agent did Helton inherit the vacant position.

After that, he let his bat do the talking. He had a dozen .300 seasons, including a league-best and personal-peak .372 in 2000.

"Whenever I got up, I wanted to get a hit," said Helton, who got two hits in his first game and later had career peaks of 49 home runs, 147 runs batted in, and 405 total bases.

An MVP trophy somehow eluded him in the year 2000, when he led the National League in hits, doubles, runs batted in, slugging, total bases, on-base percentage and OPS in addition to batting average. Two years earlier, Helton had been runner-up to Cubs pitcher Kerry Wood for NL Rookie of the Year.

His accomplishments were staggering. He was one of only four players, along with Stan Musial, Hank Aaron and Miguel Cabrera, to hit .300 while producing at least 350 home runs, 550 doubles and 2,500 hits. A rare slugger who made contact, he had more walks (1,335) than whiffs (1,175), helping him to

build a .316 lifetime average.

Sustained success against Atlanta's Hall of Fame trio of Greg Maddux (.364), Tom Glavine (.393) and John Smoltz (.417) may have helped his Hall of Fame cause. And Helton was no slouch on the road. He hit .287 with 1,125 hits and 142 home runs away from Coors.

"His swing was beautiful," said former teammate Walt Weiss, now Atlanta's bench coach, of Helton's lethal left-handed stroke. "He was just one of those pure hitters."

He practiced martial arts as an off-season way to stay in shape and studied opposing pitchers during the six-month baseball season. Helton was hampered only by recurring back problems and a balky hip that required surgical repair.

He's not the first Colorado player to reach Cooperstown (Larry Walker was in the Class of 2020), but he's the first who spent his entire career in Rockies purple.

During his heyday, Helton drew comparisons to George Brett, who is in the Hall of Fame, and Don Mattingly, who was considered by the Eras Committee last winter.

## One and done

*Hall of Famers of the Free Agent Era (since 1976) who spent their careers with one team. Note: These players' careers ended during the Free Agent Era.*

Jeff Bagwell, Astros, 2017

Ernie Banks, Cubs, 1977

Craig Biggio, Astros, 2015

Johnny Bench, Reds, 1989

George Brett, 1999

Tony Gwynn, Padres, 2007

Todd Helton, Rockies, 2024

Derek Jeter, Yankees, 2000

Chipper Jones, Braves, 2018

Al Kaline, Tigers, 1980

Barry Larkin, Reds, 2012

Edgar Martinez, Mariners, 2019

Joe Mauer, Twins, 2024

Jim Palmer, Orioles, 1990

Kirby Puckett, Twins, 2001

Cal Ripken Jr., Orioles, 2007

Mariano Rivera, Yankees, 2019

Jim Rice, Red Sox, 2009

Brooks Robinson, Orioles, 1983

Mike Schmidt, Phillies, 1995

Willie Stargell, Pirates, 1988

Alan Trammell, Tigers, 2018

Carl Yastrzemski, Red Sox 1982

Robin Yount, Brewers, 1999

Like Brett in Kansas City and Mattingly in New York with the Yankees, Helton was the face of the franchise in Denver.

In 2007, he led Colorado's drive rampage — a 14-1 finish in the regular season followed by sweeps of Philadelphia Phillies (3-0) and Diamondbacks (4-0) in the NL series and championship series, respectively.

The magic of the Rockies was, however, they lost the World Series to the Boston Red Sox in four straight games.

Even then, Helton could not be blamed; he hit .333 with five home runs scored, and a run batted in in four games.