

Beltrán, Jones at center of 2026 Hall class

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Special to USA TODAY

Before the Class of 2026 was revealed, center field was hardly the center of attention in the Hall of Fame gallery.

Sure, it had Willie, Mickey and the Duke – subjects of legends and lyrics – but the last true center fielders elected to Cooperstown were Ken Griffey Jr. (2016) and Kirby Puckett (2001).

Only 10 have now been elected by the baseball writers, with another 16 finding their way to Cooperstown via various Veterans Committees.

In fact, before Carlos Beltrán and Andruw Jones were chosen in January, there has never been a year when two center fielders were chosen at the same time.

Had the Eras Committee named Dale Murphy, a Gold Glove center fielder in Atlanta years before Jones excelled at the same position, this year's class would have been a trio.

Jones had a hard enough time getting there himself; he needed nine tries – one short of the maximum – to garner the required 75% of the vote.

Since Willie Mays retired in 1973, Griffey Jr., Puckett and Andre Dawson were the only primary center fielders selected (Robin Yount and Craig Biggio spent most of their careers as middle infielders).

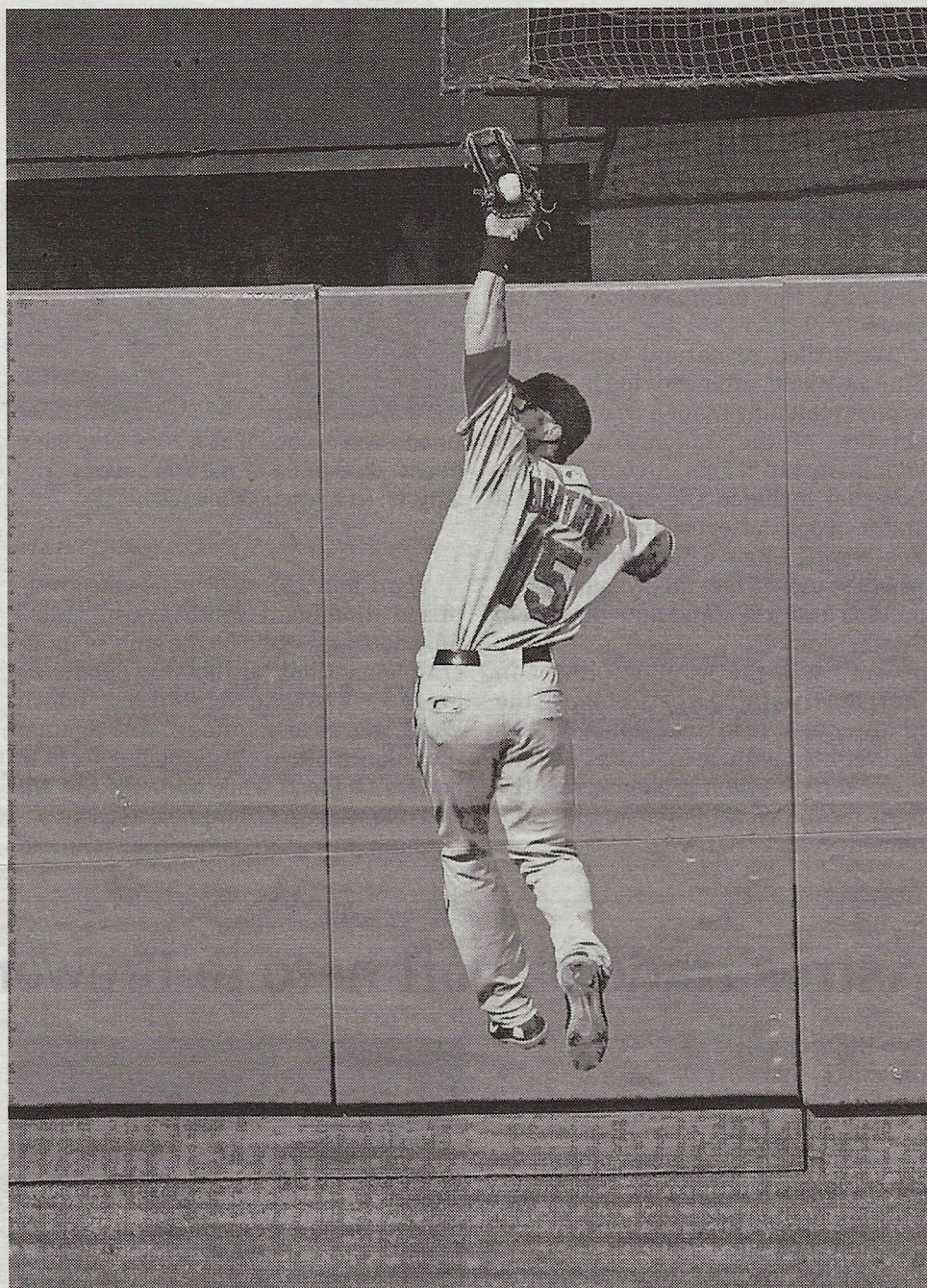
Beltrán, who got 84.2% of the vote, and Jones, with 78.4%, have more in common than winning enshrinement in the same year.

They were born just one day apart – Jones on April 23, 1977, and Beltrán a day later – and have Caribbean roots.

Jones is the first Hall of Famer from Curacao while Beltrán hails from Puerto Rico. The latter is the sixth Puerto Rican picked, joining Roberto Clemente, Orlando Cepeda, Roberto Alomar, Ivan (Pudge) Rodriguez and Edgar Martinez.

The timeline tightens when historians view Beltrán through the baseball prism of history; he once won the prestigious Roberto Clemente Award, winning the humanitarian honor in 2013.

Beltrán might have reached Cooperstown sooner if not for his involvement in the electronic sign-stealing scandal used by the 2017 Houston Astros. Exposure of that scandal, which cost Alex Cora and A.J. Hinch their jobs as man-



Mets outfielder Carlos Beltrán soars for a catch in a 2005 game against the Yankees. FRANK BECERRA JR./THE JOURNAL NEWS – USA TODAY NETWORK VIA IMAGN IMAGES

agers at the time, also hit Beltrán hard. Hired to manage the Mets, he was released after 77 days – without ever managing a game.

Yet Beltrán will wear the team's intertwined NY logo on his plaque in the Hall of Fame gallery, joining Tom Seaver and Mike Piazza as the only players on the wall wearing Mets caps on their bronze plaques.

He could have chosen a KC cap since

he spent his first five-and-a-half seasons with the Royals. But Beltrán's best work came in Flushing, where he made his strongest claim to fame – and strongest claim to the Hall of Fame.

He succeeded even though his knees often didn't. He also hit 435 home runs, one more than Jones, but had a rare failure in the ninth inning of the 2006 National League championship series Game 7. He took a called third strike on a

roundhouse curve from the Cardinals' Adam Wainwright, working in relief, as St. Louis won the pennant and the subsequent World Series.

"I see that pitch on a lot of nights," he told New York Post sportswriter Mike Vaccaro. "Talk about things that have kept me up at night."

Otherwise, his baseball résumé glitters. Beltrán is still the only switch-hitter with more than 2,500 hits, 400 home runs and 300 stolen bases. The only other players to reach that plateau were Mays, Dawson, Barry Bonds and Alex Rodriguez.

Beltrán was also an accomplished base stealer, succeeding on 86.4% of his attempts – best among players with at least 200 steals since 1920. Even Cooperstown incumbents Rickey Henderson and Lou Brock weren't that good.

The switch-hitting outfielder, the American League Rookie of the Year in 1999, went to nine All-Star Games and won three Gold Gloves, helping five different teams reach postseason play. He didn't let up there either, hitting .307 with 16 home runs and a 1.021 OPS that ranks in the Top 10 in that category.

"When I think about legacy, I don't think about numbers," he told USA TODAY's Bob Nightengale. "I think about the impact on community and society. For me, that's the legacy."

His Carlos Beltrán Baseball Academy in Puerto Rico is a bilingual high school that provides both baseball training with academic pursuits. He shares his own knowledge of the game as a special assistant in the Mets front office as well as an occasional broadcaster.

Jones joins a long line of Braves who reached Cooperstown after helping the team win a record 14 consecutive division crowns. He went from teenage World Series star to record-tying defensive star, joining Mays, Clemente, Ichiro and Griffey Jr. as the only outfielders with 10 consecutive Gold Gloves.

"I wanted to go out there, be the best at my position, and help my team win," said the five-time All-Star. "I just wanted to be myself."

He was not only the youngest man to homer in a World Series but also one of two, along with Gene Tenace, to connect in his first two Fall Classic at-bats.

"As a baseball player, we know how hard it is just to get into the Hall of Fame, but once you do, it's one of those things

Baseball Hall of Fame induction weekend

When: July 24-27

Where: Cooperstown, New York

Inductees: Carlos Beltrán, Andrew Jones, Jeff Kent. Kent, whose 377 home runs are the most by a primary second baseman in baseball history, received 14 of the 16 votes by the Contemporary Era Committee and was the only player elected on Sunday, Dec. 7. Kent, who received 46.5% of the votes in his final year on the Baseball Writers' Association of America ballot in 2023, needed 12 votes (75%) to be elected.

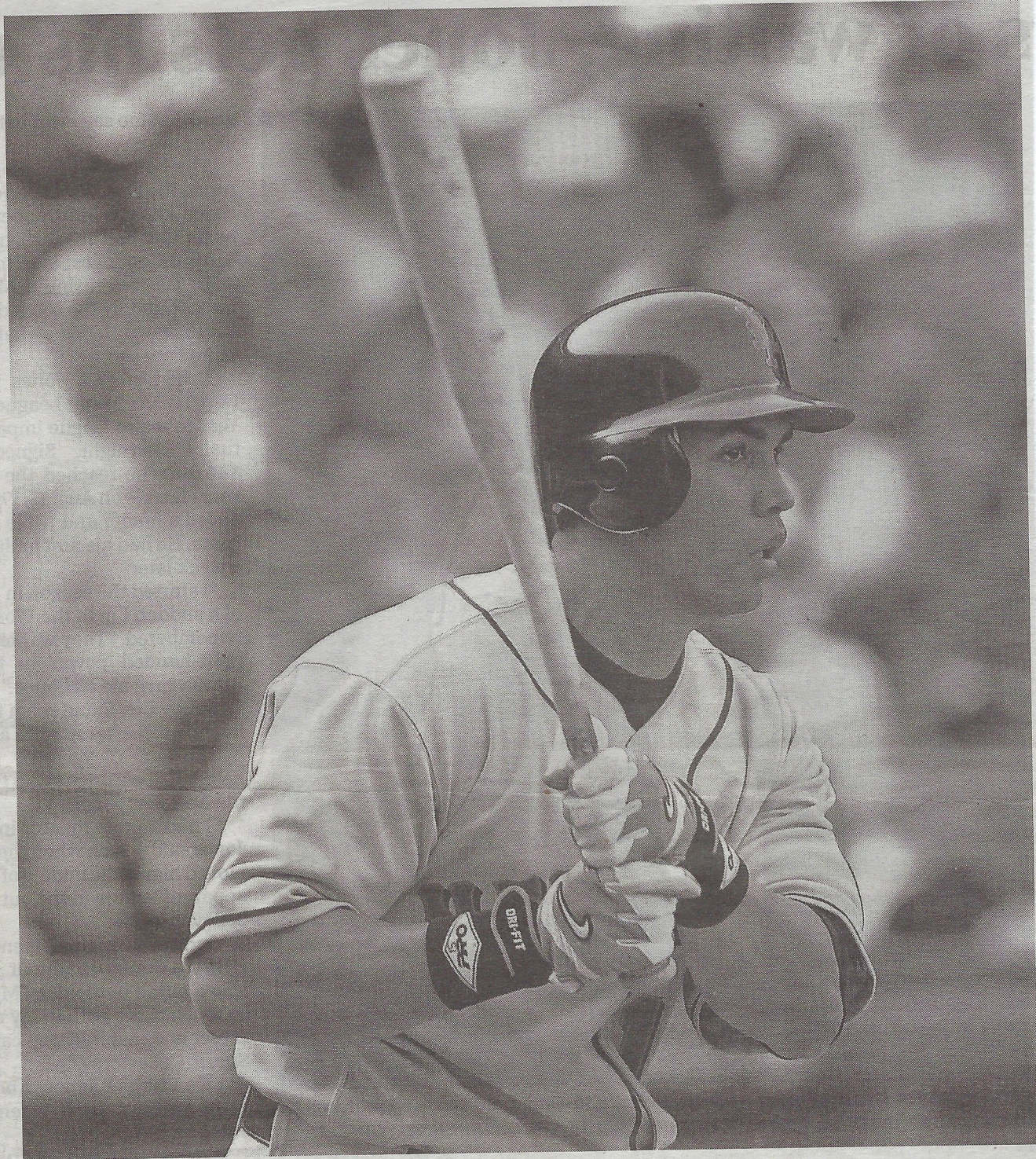
Induction ceremony: Sunday, July 26, 1:30 p.m. ET. Clark Sports Center/MLB Network

Awards presentation: Sunday, July 25, 3 p.m. ET, Alicia Busch Opera Theater.

Honorees: Buck O'Neill Lifetime Achievement Award (Bill White), Ford C. Frick Award winner for broadcasting excellence (Joe Buck), BBWAA Career Excellence Award (Paul Hoynes)

The Mets' Carlos Beltrán hits against the Yankees in the second game of the Subway Series at Yankee Stadium on June 26, 2005.

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you'll never forget," he said after his election.

Known for playing a shallow center field but getting a great jump on the ball as it was pitched, Jones joins earlier Braves Bobby Cox, John Schuerholz, Chipper Jones, Fred McGriff, Tom Glavine, Greg Maddux and John Smoltz – all enshrined since 2014. He also joins franchise icons Hank Aaron and Eddie Mathews and early-century stars Billy Hamilton, Rabbit Maranville and Tommy McCarthy – from the team's Boston

tenure – in Cooperstown.

He had a 61 bWAR (Baseball-Reference wins against replacement), fourth on that list behind Aaron, Mathews and Chipper. All of the Braves pitchers who played with Andruw Jones say they couldn't have reached the Hall of Fame without his stellar play in center field.

At first, the writers charged with choosing Hall of Famers practically ignored him. He polled only 7.3% – dangerously close to falling off the ballot – in his first try. But then more of them

realized his rare combination of power at the plate and elite defense in the field merited more consideration.

By the time he was done, Mike Schmidt, Mays and Griffey Jr. were the only other men with at least 400 home runs and 10 Gold Gloves. Jones was Ozzie Smith as an outfielder with power.

He grew up with a Griffey poster on his wall and his dad, Henry, as his personal coach. Both a catcher and outfielder in Curaçao, Jones signed at 16, rocketed through the minors and

reached the Braves before turning 20.

In 1996, he began as the cover boy for Baseball America, who named him the game's top prospect, and ended it as a World Series star, even though the Braves lost to the Yankees after winning the first two games in the Bronx.

"Bobby Cox believed in me," he said of his manager. "Bobby said go out there and be great. I didn't want to let anybody down."

He didn't: Atlanta took 10 straight division crowns (1996-2005) with Jones in center field.

Earlier this year, Jones shared his experience with young players when he managed Team Netherlands in the World Baseball Classic.

Had they reached the majors several years sooner, Jones and Beltrán would have made millions more. Beltrán, who played for seven teams, drew his peak salary in 2010, earning \$19,401,569 from the Mets. Jones once made a career-peak \$21.4 million in a season from the Los Angeles Dodgers, one of his five teams over a 17-year career.

The enshrinement of Jones, Beltrán and former infielder Jeff Kent on July 26 will swell the Hall of Fame gallery to 354 elected members, 144 chosen by the Baseball Writers' Association of America and 184 by Veterans Committees.