



# Salute to Smoltz

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January 7 2015 9:11 PM

*The following is from [Bradford Bruns](#), a special contributor to St. Louis Baseball Weekly...*

Blessed with a left arm that launched baseballs like a Howitzer, not to mention the 6-foot-10 frame, Randy Johnson carved out a reputation as one of the most intimidating hurlers ever. Pedro Martinez parlayed a plethora of preposterous pitches into arguably the finest two-season stretch in the modern era. John Smoltz, for his part, simply sucked out the marrow out of October.

All three mound craftsmen were recognized by the Hall of Fame yesterday afternoon. But while Martinez and Johnson's tools seemingly passed Cooperstown inspection years ago, Smoltz's handiwork required further review for some. After all, the Michigan native was never the guy whose otherworldly velocity literally made a dove explode. He dared not speak quasi-ill of the Bambino, and he certainly stayed away from "daddy" issues. Smoltz just won, baby, on 213 occasions over 21 magnificently understated seasons.

Several Hotlanta summers trumped others, of course. In the strike-shortened campaign of 1995, Smoltz helped the Braves capture the NL East by 21 games and, ultimately, the World Series. He went 24-8 with a 2.94 ERA and 276 strikeouts in snaring the next year's Cy Young Award. A half-decade later, he transformed into the best closer around.

The results and resolve (Smoltz endured five arm surgeries in his career) came constantly, and especially in the playoffs. This was the guy who compiled a 15-4 mark, four saves and 199 punchouts across 25 postseason series. He wound up being the lone Brave to participate in the team's entire streak of 14 straight division titles under manager Bobby Cox.

Still, it frequently seemed as if the Big Three only had room for two. If Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine found themselves occupying MLB's center stage, Smoltz straddled

the line between headliner and scene-stealing supporting act. He possessed neither Maddux's unprecedented control nor Glavine's square-jawed steeliness from the left side. But Smoltz flat-out produced, relentlessly, and kept going even when his longtime rotation mates left the bump and a two-decade partnership with Atlanta dissolved.

As Cardinals fans can attest, that 2009 tour of duty in the Midwest featured vintage moments and a sobering reality check at once. Smoltz joined the NL Central leaders following his release by Boston, which had given the eight-time All-Star \$5.5 million hoping he would conquer yet another shoulder procedure. Although it didn't happen in Beantown, St. Louis desperately needed a serviceable fifth starter – and offered the promise of one last pennant race.

On Aug. 23, Smoltz sported the birds-on-the-bat logo for the first time. He cut a swath through the San Diego Padres' lineup, tossing five scoreless innings and fanning nine in a 5-2 triumph at Petco Park. Five days later, Albert Pujols belted a walk-off homer in Smoltz's initial home contest with the Redbirds.

At age 42, though, the undaunted veteran hadn't quite discovered the fountain of youth. Subsequent turns against the division rival Milwaukee Brewers and Chicago Cubs yielded fewer positives. A disastrous regular-season finale, in which he surrendered six runs and walked five in four frames vs. the Cincinnati Reds, extinguished any chance of stealing No. 4 righty Kyle Lohse's spot in the first round.

Nonetheless, Smoltz stabilized the back end of a rotation that had employed Todd Wellemeyer, Brad Thompson, Mitchell Boggs and P.J. Walters for various ineffective stretches. He also emerged from the bullpen to strike out five Los Angeles Dodgers in Game 3 of the NLDS – his final appearance in the majors. It wasn't the grand denouement, the stuff of typical legends. It was, however, distinctly John Smoltz.

Tuesday's announcement ensures that a trio of unconscionably decorated pitchers will gain Cooperstown immortality together this July. Yet we probably shouldn't expect the first HOFer with 200 victories and 150 saves to garner an equal amount of fanfare leading up to the event. Smoltz's highlight reel somehow registers a tad less strongly than the southpaw's with the heat-seeking missile and MacGyver-worthy locks. You won't suddenly stumble into the endless audio vault of a Martinez, either, who mixed hilarity and peerless panache on the diamond.

Nope, Smoltz merely painted with dogged tenacity. He'd add a little flourish to the individual brushstroke here and there, but the presentation always retained a resplendent ruggedness. He was the everyman with the ability to produce highly sophisticated artistry. Now he's guaranteed a permanent space in baseball's quintessential gallery.