

CEPEDA'S FINEST HOUR

From a childhood of poverty to a superb 17-year major-league baseball career to disgrace and prison, Orlando Cepeda, the man known as the Baby Bull, has endured hellish lows and soared to the heights, time and again.

In his finest hour — induction to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, on July 25 — Cepeda savored his greatest victory with a beautiful flourish: In front of a roaring crowd of 50,000 people, a live ESPN national-TV audience and 900 members of the worldwide media, Cepeda, a 15-year SGI-USA member, brought it all home near the top of his acceptance speech with a thrilling tribute to the SGI and SGI President Ikeda.

“Today I would like to say that I am very proud to belong to this wonderful organization, the Soka Gakkai International, an organization led by Daisaku Ikeda, who helped me so much to be the person I am today,” Cepeda told the record crowd after a standing ovation on a hot, sun-splashed day. “Through his teaching and guidance, I learned to be a better person. I learned that with bitterness and anger and negativity you can go nowhere. Thank you to all my leaders who supported me all the way; and thank you, Sensei.”

Cepeda, 61, one of baseball's best hitters who played for six teams from 1958–74, including the San Francisco Giants and St. Louis Cardinals, was elected to the Hall alongside three of this era's finest players: third baseman George Brett of the Kansas City Royals, shortstop-outfielder Robin Yount of the Milwaukee Brewers and Nolan Ryan, who, in a four-team, 27-year career, became the greatest strikeout pitcher of all-time.

Seated onstage just behind Cepeda were 34 Hall of Fame members, including Ted Williams, Stan Musial, Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Yogi Berra, Reggie Jackson and Mike Schmidt. Also present were New York Governor George Pataki and Texas Governor George W. Bush.

Cepeda's often-told tale of rising from the ashes of defeat has become the stuff of Buddhist and baseball legend: his post-retirement arrest for marijuana smuggling in his native Puerto Rico; his 10-month imprisonment; and his unemployment, near-bankruptcy and virtual banishment from the game he loved. In 1984, Cepeda began practicing Buddhism and turned his life in a new direction. Today, he is one of only 195 Hall of Fame members and just the second Puerto Rico native to be so honored (the late Roberto Clemente was first).

Cha-Cha, as Cepeda was also called, celebrated his land and his people throughout his acceptance speech, which was peppered with Cha-Cha chants from the thousands of Puerto Rican fans in attendance.

Post-induction, Cepeda said: “You have to have courage in life. All these years, I promised myself that when I was elected to the Hall of Fame I would speak about President Ikeda. So many people in Japan criticize him; I wanted to say how great he is.”

— *THOMAS WALSH and
JEFF OURVAN*