

Morneau exceeded his dreams

The former MVP enters the Twins Hall of Fame as a key to franchise success.



AARON LAVINSKY • Star Tribune Justin Morneau retired in 2018 with 247 home runs and a .281 career batting average.

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Justin Morneau remembered the first time he came to Minnesota at about 15 years old for a hockey tournament at the University of Minnesota.

Back then, the Canadian's dream was to play in the NHL. And if he somehow ended up in his secondary sport of baseball, playing for his favored Toronto Blue Jays was the goal.

But he attended a Twins game regardless, taking it all in from left field in the Metrodome.

Little did he know that just seven or so years later, he'd be on the field in a Twins uniform.

And fast-forward another 25 years, he'd be joining the team's Hall of Fame.

"You never dreamed for a moment like this," Morneau said Friday. "You just dream for one day in the big leagues.

And then you get to cap it all off in the end with something like this? It's almost surreal."

The Twins will induct the former first baseman Saturday before their game against Toronto at Target Field. The 14-year major league veteran will be the 34th member and will have plenty of former teammates and Twins greats there to support him. The Twins elected Morneau to the Hall of Fame in January 2020 but postponed his May induction that year because of COVID-19.

Morneau — now 40 and living on a farm in Medina with wife Krista, their five children and various animals — played with the Twins from 2003-13.

He was an American League MVP (2006), a two-time Silver Slugger Award winner (2006 and 2008) and a fourtime All-Star (2007-10). He hit 221 home runs throughout his 1,278 games for the Twins. A 2010 concussion and other subsequent injuries derailed his career a bit, but he went on to play for Pittsburgh, Colorado and the White Sox before retiring in 2016.

While his career ended without a coveted World Series ring, Morneau still has plenty of good memories to cherish, even joking the Twins "did win a playoff game" in his tenure. But mostly he appreciates the caliber of players he shared the field with, including Joe Mauer, Torii Hunter, Johan Santana and Joe Nathan.

Twins broadcaster Dick Bremer said Morneau will forever embody that era.

"[He's] a link to what was one of the best periods of baseball Twins fans have ever had," Bremer said. "... Every year, it seemed like, for a long run of time, six divisions and championships in nine years.

That was about as good as it gets for a midmarket franchise.

The Twins were really, really good for a long time, and he was a big, big part of it."

Bremer and Morneau now share a booth, as Morneau has taken on being a part-time analyst for Twins broadcasts in recent years. He also has been a special assistant to baseball operations for the team since 2018.

Bremer said Morneau brings that insider look to broadcasts, translating his deep knowledge of the game to viewers and sharing with them parts they wouldn't otherwise see. And he attacked this new career with the same hardworking mentality and study he employed as a player.

“There’s really nothing that can ever replace the challenge of trying to get ready for a 162-game season and trying to face the best in the world every night,” Morneau said.

“... Obviously, I went from the best job in the world to the second-best job in the world. I get to talk about baseball now.

That’s something that I never really thought would come along, and it did.”

Morneau might still long for his playing days, the adrenaline and camaraderie that came with it. But in some ways, he does still show up on the field. At least, in spirit. Rookie Trevor Larnach has picked Morneau’s brain about how to succeed in the majors. Current first baseman Miguel Sano recalls many moments with Morneau in Fort Myers, Fla., for spring training since Sano signed with the Twins in 2009.

“Great first baseman when he played. Great hitter, power hitter,” Sano said, recalling how he watched Morneau win the 2008 Home Run Derby. “... We had a lot of conversations together. He’s a person who taught me how to play first base, and we’ve been having a good relationship. And I think that guy is an unbelievable person, player, everything.”

Now Morneau has cemented his legacy with the Twins, alongside the likes of Kirby Puckett, Rod Carew and Harmon Killebrew. But Morneau is looking forward to celebrating everyone who helped him to this point, especially the ones most fans don’t know.

“High school coaches are here, and the guy who owned the batting cage I used to go to, let me hit for free,” Morneau said, adding the Twins told him his guest list was the longest they’d ever had. “... It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to share a moment like this in a stadium full of people.

So many people that helped you get there.”