

# How J.D. Drew Might Have Been a Baseball Hall of Fame Player

## Overcoming injuries and misconceptions to quietly earn his keep in Major League Baseball

If you ask many baseball fans about J.D. Drew, many of them will likely say that he had All-Star potential that he never lived up to for one reason or another. But, by the numbers, Drew was actually a borderline Hall of Fame candidate for his play. He was on the [2017 Hall of Fame ballot](#), but received no votes. My opinion is that he was overlooked and should have received at least some consideration, but that ballot was so overcrowded with talent, perhaps it's not that much of a surprise.

In his 14-year Major League Baseball career, J.D. Drew hit .278/.384/.489 with 242 home runs. His glove was worth 69 runs in the outfield according to the advanced defensive metrics from TotalZone. For his solid bat and above-average glove, Drew was worth a substantial 44.9 Wins Above Replacement (WAR) according to Baseball Reference. FanGraphs, which uses a slightly different measure of that statistic, grants Drew 46 WAR.

His career numbers and advanced statistics make Drew comparable to Baseball Hall of Fame member Edd Roush and Indians & Tigers legend Rocky Colavito. Drew has also more career WAR than early 20th-century hall of famers Hugh Duffy and Roger Bresnahan. I'm not saying that J.D. Drew actually belongs in the Hall of Fame. But, at one time, there is a possibility that he could've gotten there. So, what happened?

## J.D. Drew and the St. Louis Cardinals Years

Actually, J.D. Drew started out extremely well. After murdering AA and AAA in 1998, Drew had a torrid 14 game introduction to the major leagues, hitting .417/.463/.972. But, in 1999, after hitting well in AAA, his first rookie season was actually pretty mediocre with the bat (91 OPS+) but exceptional with the glove in center field (17 runs above average). Overall, he was worth 2.7 WAR for the Cardinals in his debut year.

The 2000 season was a good one for Drew. He'd hit 18 HR, steal 17 bases, and have a .880 OPS, good for a 121 OPS+. 2001 was a monster year, as he hit for a 160+ OPS. But even then, he started missing games here and there with nagging injuries. This would be a theme

throughout his career. He would only play more than 140 games in a season three times. Even so, he racked up 18.1 WAR in 6 seasons with St. Louis.

Outside of St. Louis and those who followed the Cardinals closely, however, there was a rookie in 2001 who quickly overshadowed Drew. This guy's named was Albert Pujols. Apparently, [he'd go on to hit 703 home runs](#). In hindsight, I can see why Drew's consistent strong play was often completely missed by most observers.

## J.D. Drew and His Career Year With the Atlanta Braves

After the 2003 season, Drew was traded along with Eli Marrero for Ray King, Jason Marquis, and Adam Wainwright. It would be a good trade in the end for the Cardinals as Wainwright blossomed into an ace pitcher. But it was also good for the Braves, who got Drew's biggest season and the only season in which he hit more than 30 HR - .305/.436/.569 with 31 HR and 12 steals for 8.3 WAR.

Drew was looking pretty good at this point with 26.4 WAR in 7 seasons. Interestingly, though, Drew had zero All-Star game appearances, despite being an All-Star level player in all but 2003, and he only played 100 games that year and still collected 2.5 WAR. That's because his power numbers were good, but not great, and he missed a lot of games with nagging injuries.

## J.D. Drew, the Dodgers, and the Red Sox

A two-year deal with the Los Angeles Dodgers proved fruitful as he posted 3.2 and 4 WAR seasons. What's most impressive is that his 3.2 WAR season was in an injury-marred 2005 campaign in which he played only 72 games. The Red Sox really liked what they saw in 2006 and gave Drew a five-year, \$80 million contract.

While many Red Sox fans seem to remember only the beginning and end of that contract, Drew actually was pretty good with the Red Sox. After an injury-marred 2007 in which he still managed to play 140 games but diminished at both the plate and the field, he was actually an important piece of the Red Sox's run to winning the 2007 World Series. In 2008, Drew played very well and earned his first All-Star game appearance, and then he got hurt again...

Fortunately, Drew managed to be just as good in 2009 and actually played 140 games. But in 2010, despite playing 139 games, his nagging injuries were clearly eroding his ability at the plate, although he was still a 3 WAR player thanks to still being above league average and very good on defense. In his first four seasons with the Red Sox, he collected 12.2 WAR. That's not a horrible return on investment for \$64 million over four years.

Unfortunately, at age 35 in 2011, the wheels just fell off for Drew. He would actually be “worth” -0.9 WAR for the Red Sox in 81 games; FanGraphs was more kind with -0.3 WAR. However, this is a season in which the wheels fell off for the 90-win Red Sox in general. Had he not been hurt, Drew could’ve helped save that season. But, he was clearly a washed-up player at that point, mostly in the lineup due to his \$14 million salary.

In hindsight, the Red Sox may have been better off releasing him and eating the salary; FanGraphs suggests he actually cost the Sox \$2 million worth of value. After all, Boston had Josh Reddick, already a good player, who could’ve taken his spot; but they’d be idiots and trade him for Andrew Bailey before the 2012 season, one of the worse trades the Sox made in the 2010’s. Fortunately, it still worked out for Boston in the long run. But that 2011 season put a bad taste in a lot of Sox fans mouths. Drew got unfairly blamed for a lot of the team’s problems, the season in which the infamous “Chicken and Beer” clubhouse meltdown occurred.

## Was J.D. Drew Unfairly Underrated?

Many baseball fans tend to remember the broken down version of Drew. It’s too bad because on the balance, J.D. actually was a pretty good player. Unfortunately, there was a perception throughout his career that [Drew was frequently injured and lacked competitive fire](#). This followed him from draft day all the way through his time at Fenway Park.

From someone who saw him play on a daily basis during his time in Boston, I believe that Drew was rather misconceived. Yes, J.D. is very easygoing, but when he did play, he seemed to go all out in the field. Drew always seemed focused. If anything, he may have been trying *too hard*. Drew is the kind of guy where if he couldn’t give you 100 percent, he’d rather someone else take his spot.

Drew had one of the best batting eyes in the game at the time and when he was locked in, he had a great swing that could do a lot of damage. His power numbers such as home runs and RBI weren’t eye-popping, but he made up for those with his on-base skills and overall ability to hit for extra bases. Also, from the eye test, Drew was also a very underrated fielder; the defensive metrics suggest he was slightly above average. He was a perennial All-Star level player, but only got one All-Star appearance with Boston in 2008.

It wasn’t that J.D. wasn’t competitive; if anything, he was competitive as anyone. But because his agent, the notorious Scott Boras, always managed to get him some very lucrative deals, people’s expectations were sky-high. However, if you consider the [FanGraphs player value section for J.D. Drew](#), which uses a WAR to estimated market value dollars, his results often far exceeded expected contributions for his salary. In the end, Drew was a pretty good baseball player, and quietly was more than earning his salary.

## Could J.D. Drew Have Ever Gotten Into the Baseball Hall of Fame?

Of course, being “pretty good” doesn’t get Drew in the Baseball Hall of Fame. J.D. was a very calm and quiet player and many people had the impression that he refused to play unless he felt one hundred percent. Also, because he missed so much time, Drew never really became beloved by any fan base.

Had Drew not missed substantial time in several seasons, would he be on the Hall of Fame bubble? Would an extra season or two worth of games push him into real contention for a plaque in Cooperstown? It’s more likely that Drew’s quiet demeanor and unimpressive power numbers pretty much eliminated any chance of serious consideration. But, Drew actually had a great career, considering how many injuries he suffered.

Despite his injuries, Drew never stopped playing hard. Plus, he stuck with the game he loved for nearly a decade and a half in the Major Leagues. In the end, he made the Cardinals look smart for choosing him fifth overall in the draft. It’s unfortunate that people have a negative perception of Drew, and he may be one of the most underrated baseball players from the first decade of the 21st century.

*Updated 5/29/23*