



## **Minoso 90? 88? 87? Age only a state of (your) mind as Sox legend stays active**

*By George Castle, CBM Historian*

It's fitting that Minnie Minoso and Bill Veeck went out together on Oct. 5, 1980.

That otherwise forgettable final day of the season at Comiskey Park was notable for the last big-league at-bat for Minoso and last game in the final ownership tenure of Veeck. Minoso pinch-hit for Chet Lemon against Dave Shuler of Angels, grounding to third base leading off seventh on Oct. 5, 1980.

Both men were forever linked, first of all in exulting in the joy of baseball. Veeck's Cleveland Indians organization, the second to break the color line, brought Minoso, the beloved "Cuban Comet," into organized baseball in 1946. Veeck brought Minoso back for his second White Sox stint for the 1960-61 seasons. And although it seemed a typical Veeck stunt that to some thumbed its nose at the game's conventions, who really could argue with the ageless Minoso having token at-bats as a fiftysomething pinch hitter at the end of the lost Sox seasons in 1976 and 1980?

Unfortunately, the Veeck-Minoso cord has been cut, the victim of the march of time. Veeck was never blessed with the long, long life enjoyed by Minoso. He was not around to help Minnie celebrate what some believed was his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday on Nov. 29.

The precise age doesn't matter, even though the accounts are all over the map. Saturnino Orestes Armas (Arrieta) Minoso is starting his 10<sup>th</sup> decade of life, as is noted on Minoso's own web site and pre-eminent Sox historian Rich Lindberg's "Total White Sox" book, or merely his 87<sup>th</sup> birthday, listed in most other biographies like BaseballReference.com.

"It's 88," said Sharon Minoso, Minnie's wife. "I told him last couple of years, he should put (the age issue) to rest." She added her husband's age was written down incorrectly when he first came to the United States from Cuba and never permanently corrected in public perception.

Minnie's own view?

"They give 88, 90, I let them do it," he said. "Most people say, 'Minnie, how old are you?' I don't say anything."

Minoso has helped himself reach this point of his life on his feet and active. Minoso quit smoking for good when son Charlie, now 24, was 2. And he has never acted his age, anyway, and isn't starting now.

### **A man in love with Chicago**

You see him around Chicago all the time in his role as the senior White Sox team “ambassador” and in just being, well, Minnie. He enjoys life and life enjoys him. He is a man in love with the city that adopted him from the moment he first donned Sox pin-striped flannels.

“When I came to Chicago May 1, 1951, I fell in love with this city and its people,” Minoso said. “When you fall in love with anyplace you are in, you stay. The only thing I got was love (from the fans). I pay back my respect and my love to the fans. They know me and I know them. They give me love and respect, where else would I have this?”



Minoso gives back far more than he takes. Such an attitude earned him the 2012 Jerome Holtzman Award from the Chicago Baseball Museum for his contributions to Chicago baseball, accepted by Minoso at the Pitch and Hit Club's Banquet Jan. 30.

“I think Minnie's just a happy guy,” Sharon Minoso said. “He doesn't let things bother him. He has a good outlook. When baseball season is around, I think it keeps him younger and happy. He's social when he's in public and with people. When Minnie tired, he comes home and he's quiet.

Sounds like type of the “character guy” who belongs in the Hall of Fame. The Sox launched a campaign last year to promote Minoso's candidacy for Coopers-town.

“Don't put me in the Hall after I'm dead,” Minnie said then. “I want to taste it, like a good steak. I want to enjoy it.”

When you're in Minoso's presence, you can time-trip back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, to his experiences starting in baseball in Cuba, playing in the Negro Leagues or serving as the No. 1 spark of the “Go-Go Sox” revival era as the man who broke the color line in Chicago baseball on Tuesday, May 1, 1951. Or you can enjoy the present, where Minnie has cast his loyalty to the city that brought him fame. Rather than escaping to the Sun-belt, he has opted to live his life in Chicago, winters and all, and stay on his feet – fortunate compared to many of his age cohorts – to enjoy what the world-class metropolis has to offer.

If you meet Minnie at a special event or just run into him on the street near his Near

North Side home, you'll bask in the glow of the game at its best. His story is classic baseball.

### **Cutting sugar cane, then playing in Cuba**

A natural at hitting, fielding and hustling after cutting sugar cane in his youth, Minoso progressed through Cuban baseball and the New York Cubans of the Negro League in 1946-47. When scout Bill Killefer watched Minoso and recommended him before the 1948 season to Veeck, then in his first ownership stint with the Cleveland Indians, it was a second-generation Veeck-Killefer connection. Killefer had been manager from 1921-25 for Cubs president William L. Veeck, father of Bill Veeck.

Minoso was blocked by experienced outfielders in Cleveland, appearing in only nine games in 1949. But then he got his big break. In turn his arrival was an even larger boost for the White Sox after three-plus decades of wandering in the wilderness following the team breakup due to the "Black Sox Scandal" of 1919-21.

On April 30, 1951, frenetic Sox GM Frank "Trader" Lane dealt outfielders Dave Philley and Gus Zernial to the Philadelphia Athletics as part of a three-team trade with the Indians. The Sox got Minoso. He wasted little time making his mark the next night at Comiskey Park. Batting third and playing third base, Minoso slugged a two-run homer, his second in the majors, into the center-field bullpen off New York Yankees' Vic Raschi. Six innings later, Yankees rookie right fielder Mickey Mantle belted his first big-league homer off Randy Gumpert in the eventual 8-3 Sox loss.

Minoso would go on to match Mantle's numbers in some categories except homers and RBIs throughout the 1950s. His speed and dash was the centerpiece of the "Go-Go Sox," who went on a 14-game winning streak two weeks after Minoso's arrival. The Sox excited Chicago with their first-place, 32-11 record. They'd eventually fade to 81-73 and fourth, but they were no longer AL bottom-feeders. They'd dog Mantle's Yankees as contenders the rest of the decade.

Minoso's break-in season was one for the ages. He led the AL with 14 triples and 31 stolen bases (remember, this was a slugging-first, base-thieving last era). He scored 109 runs and batted .324 in just 138 Sox games.

### **A helping hand and bat to Sam Hairston**

He also became a classy teammate. In the sixth inning of the July 21, 1951 Washington Senators-Sox game at Comiskey Park, newly-recalled Sam Hairston, the second black player on the Sox, was called on to pinch-hit for starting catcher Joe Erazz. Running in from the bullpen, Hairston was denied use of a bat belonging to an unnamed white teammate. The always joyous Minoso lent Hairston his own war club. Hairston banded a double to deep center for his first big-league hit.

"He was a great man," Minoso said of Hairston. The two became friends through the decades. They got to work together when Hairston was hired as a longtime Sox minor-league coach.

Lending Hairston his bat was simply an act of humanity that obviously was beyond the comprehension of the Sox teammate who refused the use of his bat.

“I never see a difference between race, color and nationality,” said Minoso.

That story was passed down in the Hairston family. Sam Hairston became scion of a record-breaking five big-leaguers who played over three generations. Son Jerry Hairston, Sr. ended up a longtime Sox pinch hitter and minor-league coach, like his father. Brother John Hairston was the Cubs’ first African-American catcher in 1969, while grandson Jerry Hairston, Jr. also was a Cubs infielder-outfielder in 2005-06. Outfielder Scott Hairston, brother of Jerry, Jr., has played for the Diamondbacks, Padres, Athletics and Mets. His debut in the majors enabled the Hairstons to surpass the Bell and Boone families, who each had four big-leaguers over three generations.



Despite hitting more than .300 in four of five seasons between 1953 and 1957, racking up a peak of 116 RBIs in 1954 and serving along with Nellie Fox as the straws that stirred the Sox, Minoso was dealt back to the Indians after the '57 season in a trade that ended up benefiting Chicago. The Sox received Early Wynn and Al Smith in return. Wynn was a 22-game-winning Cy Young Award winner for the 1959 pennant winners, while Smith proved a clutch hitter, albeit with inferior overall numbers, as Minoso’s replacement in left field.

### **Did his part in Veeck’s 1960 attempt to win again**

Having taken over as Sox owner in 1959, Veeck brought Minoso back for 1960 in a big effort to add punch to the light Sox run production, the only perceived team weakness. Veeck was blistered in succeeding decades for surrendering promising young players like Norm Cash, Johnny Callison, Don Mincher, John “Honey” Romano and Earl Battey in deals to land Minoso, first baseman Roy Sievers and third baseman Gene Freese. The departure of the kids might have hurt the Sox in the long run. But of all the veterans corralled, Minoso did his job just like old times. In 1960, he slugged 20 homers with 105 RBI’s and a .311 average. The '60 Sox contended into September, but faded to third due to a dropoff in the stellar pitching of '59.

After Veeck departed as owner in mid-season 1961, ostensibly due to health reasons, Minoso was traded away again, this time to the St. Louis Cardinals. But the Sox couldn’t get enough of him. They re-acquired him as a free agent in time for the 1964 season. This time, he batted just .226 in 30 games and was released.

Eventually, Minoso would endear himself not only to Veeck in his return to the Sox in 1975, but also the succeeding Jerry Reinsdorf ownership. Yet another attempt was made to activate Minoso for a pinch-hitting appearance at the end of the 1993 season. But the Major League Players Association frowned on the idea, and Minoso stayed “retired.”

According to the family records revealed by Sharon Minoso, her husband remains the second-oldest player to bat in the majors in 1980, just behind Nick Altrock’s previous record at age 57 in 1933. Satchel Paige, pitching at 59 in 1965, is the oldest player to ever perform in the majors.

But however he ranks in the record books, age is only a number to Minoso. His mindset is indeed “go-go,” just like 1951.

Minnie used to drive Charlie to high school at Roycemore in Evanston. “That was their father-and-son time,” Sharon recalled. Charlie Minoso now is pursuing a public relations career.

The elder Minoso simply can’t get off his feet, whether working for the Sox, pursuing a sideline as the most active cook in the family (sometimes preparing five courses) or greeting neighbors as he walks Jewels, the family’s 14-year-old border collie.

And despite his upbringing in tropical Cuba, he plows through the Chicago winters with aplomb.

“Cold doesn’t bother him,” said Sharon. “He handles the cold better than I can, and I’m from Wisconsin.”

Why not? This is a man who warms a room, winter or summer, by just walking in.

Happy Birthday, Minnie.