



Minnie documentary details a Hall of Fame-caliber personal life, career on WTTW-TV

By George Castle, CBM historian

Any long-form documentary that can go deep into an interviewee's personality over a many-decades-long span must have a theme, an angle, a conclusion.

In "Baseball's Been Very, Very Good To Me: The Minnie Minoso Story," legendary Chicago TV producer Tom Weinberg didn't have to reach for a description of his subject.

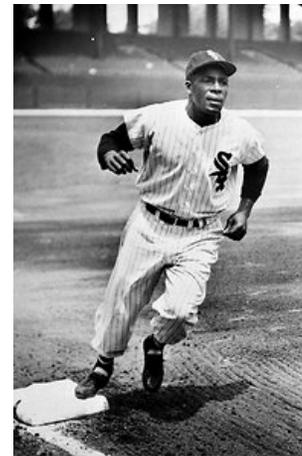
The sense is this is a guy who's had a steel will from the time he was a kid," Weinberg said of the ageless White Sox legend Minoso, "to the time he was a young man playing a ball, to the time he came to the States not knowing a word of English.

"Every time he came to bat he was determined and concentrated. That spirit, that person is alive today, whether he's 86, 89 or 103. He's steely. Somebody to respect. The older I get, the more I have respect for people who are old, who don't quit, who stay with who they are."

"Baseball's Been Very, Very Good to Me" airs at 10 p.m. Central Time Tuesday, Dec. 11, on WTTW-TV (Channel 11). Yes, "The Cuban Comet" did actually say the homily, repeated by him several times in the documentary, and famously adapted to "Saturday Night Live" sketches more than three decades ago. Weinberg's had a generations-long connection with WTTW while producing more than 600 documentaries and non-fiction programs.

As Weinberg said, "timing is everything," with five-decade big-leaguer Minoso having celebrated his birthday on Nov. 29. He screened the documentary at his birthday party at Sluggers near Wrigley Field. Minoso is an octogenarian, with some believing he was as old as 90. Wife Sharon insisted legal documents prove he just turned 88, and wishes he'd put to an end the endless dancing around about his real age. In the 1976 clip, Minoso tells Weinberg he's 54. Do the math.

Weinberg figures several factors have spurred Minoso's longevity and continued good health.



‘Joy of life,’ good genes a MInoso key

“His attitude is an uncompromising sense of the joy of life,” he said. “And very good genes. His absolute strength of character is that nothing will stop him. Physical, social, mental. That’s the competitiveness you find in a very, very few athletes or human beings overall, that kind of intensity.”

Whatever MInoso’s actual birthdate in his native Cuba in the 1920s, he’s never acted his age. His Peter Pan-eternal youth-type joy to go along with his stellar statistics for the Sox and three other teams mandates serious consideration for the Hall of Fame.

Weinberg, 68, grew up watching MInoso’s greatest days with the 1950s “Go-Go” Sox, calling him a “hero” his entire life. But he became personally associated with him while working on another TV project during the Sox’s spring training 1976 in Sarasota, Fla. A tape of the two preparing to play shuffleboard in ’76 with a long-haired Weinberg and dark-haired MInoso is included in the show.

“He was no question fascinating,” Weinberg said. “I’ve always been interested in him and connected to him in one way or another, starting as a kid and now as an old man. It’s hard to say what’s most interesting.



“Whenever I do something like this, if you’re not in love with the person when you start, you are by the time you’re done. You spend so much time with them, thinking about them, editing them. You always look for the bright side. And God knows, Minnie has plenty of bright side.”

In the very opening of the show, MInoso tells Weinberg: “I love you and respect you a lot.”

MInoso’s top role in Chicago baseball history is breaking the color line on either side of town with his Sox debut against the New York Yankees on Tuesday night, May 1, 1951, after coming over in a trade from the Cleveland Indians, his original major-league organization. Weinberg believes MInoso had just the right kind of temperament to be the Jackie Robinson of the Windy City. He had a double-whammy in ’51. In addition to MInoso’s color, he still possessed just scattershot ability in English.

The right temperament to break Chicago color line

“If had been somebody different, he couldn’t have done that (cross color line). He was an unusual guy to be able to do it, and it took an amazing concentration of strength, which he embodies. Could anybody else have done it? I don’t know.

Could anybody else have been Jackie Robinson? I don’t know. It’s about timing. It’s about things bigger than they are as individuals. And they had to be really good as a

ballplayer.

“Baseball’s Been Very, Very Good To Me” had to be a labor of love first of all for Weinberg. Fund-raising and production costs were dicey. He had to employ the fund-raising web site Kickstarter to raise about \$19,000. Others made individual donations.

“I called in some markers,” Weinberg said. “Some people cared enough to volunteer. I wish (fund-raising) was higher, we’d get something back.”

He had to pay rights fees for films and still photos not only to Major League Baseball, but other repositories of visual records. Weinberg estimates he mined “maybe a dozen different sources” for the historical guts of the show.

Minoso’s recollections are interspersed in the production. Weinberg had him standing in the parking lot on the north side of 35th Street, on the site that once was old Comiskey Park. Minoso points to the faraway spot where he hit his first Sox homer in his Chicago debut on May 1, 1951.

In addition to the vintage newsreel films and stills, interviews with Latino luminaries -- including Cuban-born Hall of Famer Tony Perez -- are included. They provide the perspective on Minoso’s powerful effect on the Spanish-speaking players who followed him. With Bill Veeck deceased for nearly 27 years, son Mike Veeck fills in for that family’s inside view. Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf, who spearheaded the effort to get Minoso voted into the Hall of Fame, also has a prominent role.

ESPN preferred a series of shows, not just a one-shot deal, so the program is not airing on the WorldWide Leader. WTTW also would be a receptive client. Weinberg has talked to the MLB Network, which wasn’t ready to commit its help when the show was ready to go. He still thinks the MLB-run outlet might be open to a future airing.

Spur to Hall of Fame voting?

The by-product of the documentary is if it spurs baseball’s Golden Era Committee to finally elect Minoso to Cooperstown.

“Obviously I hope so,” Weinberg said. “It’s not a rational process. Roland (Hemond) sat in (the committee’s voting) room, He thought everything was fine. He was sitting there for hours and hours. It’s a mysterious process. You can’t tell even if you’re setting in the room, as Roland was, what’s going to happen.

“I have no way of predicting whether it will help. Certainly I’d like it to.”

And if the vote doesn’t ever swing Minoso’s way, at least there’s an hour of good TV detailing why yet another deserving candidate should have made the cut.

