

Restless Minoso Is Hopeful Final Wish Will Be Granted

By Paul Ladewski

Normally, it doesn't take much to get a word out of Minnie Minoso, the former White Sox great. He hasn't been himself lately, though. He has tossed and turned for weeks. He admits to a few cowboy movies in the wee hours.

On the way to U.S. Cellular field on Thursday, when a public forum was held to raise awareness for his Hall of Fame bid, not even his wife Sharon could get a peep out of him.

"I said, 'Hey, Superstar, are you ready for this?'" she said. "He didn't have much to say. He has been that way for awhile now."

Then again, when you're 85 years old – or is it 88? – and your last wish on Earth is in the hands of the 16 members of the Golden Age election committee, it's not easy to put so many thoughts into words. The vote will take place on Dec. 5 at the winter meetings in Dallas.

"To be in the Hall of Fame is my last wish in this life," Minoso told the Chicago Baseball Museum. "If I am lucky to get there, I don't know if I will be dead or alive when they have the ceremony. I might have a heart attack when they tell me. This is something that I have wanted for a long time."

That Minoso has been under the radar this long perplexes many of those who played in the 1950s, often referred to as the Golden Era of baseball.

From the 1951 to 1961 seasons, Minoso was on a very short list of best all-around players in the major leagues. In the 11-year period, he ranked second in hits (1,861), extra-base hits (579), total bases (2,879), runs scored (1,078) and triples (81) among American League players. His .305 batting average was fifth overall. A lifetime .298 hitter, he was the rare athlete who had no weakness, one who could win games in every way possible -- at the plate, on the basepaths and in the field.

"I'm a bit biased, but Willie Mays is the best outfielder that I ever saw," said former White Sox pitcher Billy Pierce, who finished his own brilliant career with San Francisco Giants in the National League. "In the American League, Mickey Mantle was at the top of my list, then came Minnie and Al Kaline. To be mentioned in the same breath as Mays, Mantle and Kaline puts him in pretty good company, I would say."

What's more, the Cuban Comet accomplished this as the first Hispanic star in the major leagues, which presented a unique set of obstacles at a time when race relations were tenuous at best in the country.

"We never talked about race on our team," said Pierce, one of several baseball experts who went to bat for Minoso at the conference. "Minnie was part of us, and we were part of him. Not everyone outside our clubhouse felt the same way, I'm sure, but you never heard him complain."

Indeed, ask anyone who played with Minoso in his career, and he'll talk about value that went far beyond tangible results.

"Minnie was a great teammate," said Jim Landis, who spent four seasons as his sidekick in the outfield. "Wins and losses were the only statistics that mattered to him."

Asked Pierce, "How do you explain that Minnie isn't in the Hall of Fame right now?"

The simple answer that fans and media tend to pass judgment strictly on the basis of career numbers. In that regard, Minoso falls short of the mark. In 17 seasons, he totaled 1,963 hits, 186 home runs, 1,023 RBI and 205 stolen bases. While impressive, the numbers don't compare to those of current Hall of Fame members.

Yet the Minoso case is unlike almost any other and requires closer scrutiny as a result.

According to official baseball records, Minoso was born in Nov. 29, 1925, which meant

that he was 25 years old in 1951, his first full season in the big leagues. For the sake of argument, suppose Minofo had been allowed to begin his career three years earlier. Tack on the totals of his first three complete seasons, and the revised bottom line looks much different – .300 batting average, 2,470 hits, 224 home runs, 1,264 RBI and 283 stolen bases.

Minofo maintains that he was born in 1922, which would have made him 28 years old at the start of the 1951 season. Based on the same assumption, that means that he lost six complete seasons. Add the numbers of his first six seasons, and the results are Hall of Fame-worthy especially by modern standards – .301 batting average, 2,973 hits, 274 home runs, 1,538 RBI and 332 stolen bases. Rafael Palmeiro is the only eligible player with at least 2,900 career hits and 1,500 RBI not in the Hall of Fame at present. And nobody with at least 2,900 hits, 1,500 RBI and 300 stolen bases has been left out.

Take in account that Minofo blazed the trail with pride and dignity for Hispanic players much like Jackie Robinson did for African-Americans not long before him – a distinction that is his and his alone -- and any reasonable doubt about his Hall of Fame credentials is erased once and for all, it seems.

At 88 years old – or is it 85? -- Minofo can only hope that the committee sees it his way finally.

“I can't tell you what the Hall of Fame would mean to me,” he said. “It would mean everything.”

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