

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Kittle-over-Minoso vote as Sox all-time left fielder puzzling

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I like Ron Kittle.

And I l-o-o-o-ve Kitty's furry white dog, Harley, a star of the former Sox slugger's Facebook page. I message Kitty that Harley should be fed prime steak before Kitty chomps down on his first bite at any meal.

"Harley doesn't even like people food," Kittle said.

If you can't like the 1983 American League rookie of the year, then you've got problems. You'll see Kittle, the man who grew up in Northwest Indiana and never left the area, all over the place making appearances at a Sox ambassador.

Again, I joke with him on Facebook to make sure he gets a freebie meal when he shows up at an appearance at a Jewel. I suggested he also arrive with a doggy bag to take stuff home for Harley. Kitty was fed well in his playing days by legendary Sox clubhouse man "Chicken Willie" and why should it stop now?

But would I vote for Kittle as the all-time Sox left fielder? No.

Enough Chicago Tribune readers in print and on-line apparently disagree. In a weekly poll of the "Greatest Baseball Team of All Time" for the Cubs and Sox, Kittle was just named the Sox's top left fielder over Hall of Fame-worthy Minnie Minoso.

We'll give Kittle, busy at his southwest suburban Mokena home crafting his "Bat Bench" sculptures, first crack at explaining this odd turn of events. How did a man who hit 140 homers and .237 in parts of eight Sox seasons gets chosen over Minoso, a .304 hitter with 1,523 hits in 12 seasons (two of which were Bill Veeck-inspired cameos in 1976 and 1980).



Ron Kittle (left) feels his recent public persona got him the vote over Minnie Minoso.

It's a "what have you done for me lately deal." Minoso died March 1, 2015. Kittle is out and about today. Minoso's English was still very accented by his native Cuba. Kittle did a ton of radio and TV in his native Midwestern twang from the day he belted 35 homers, including rooftop jobs, in '83.

'Popularity contest'

"I really think it's just like presidential race, it's a popularity contest," he said. "I was very unfamiliar with this (poll). I think people vote who they like. I love Minnie. It's nothing but a popularity contest.

"I'm a nice person. I have an good amount of friends. The public is tired of spoiled people. I told someone, 'I'm a horse (bleep) ballplayer, but a great carpenter. That's what people are looking for these days."

If former NBA Commissioner David Stern once said he was envious of the history baseball possessed compared to basketball, then many baseball fans apparently don't pay attention to that heritage. And the two top Sox historians throw an indictment against the team's fans.

"The selection of Kittle is a disappointing affirmation of what I have always suspected of Sox fans and for that matter fans of all teams," said many-times-author Rich Lindberg, who supplied much of the historical text the Sox have used in team publications and releases. "And that is, if they didn't see the player play or (is) within the span of their own memory, the more qualified player from decades past is completely forgotten.

"When I was a kid, I read about baseball history in library books. I never saw Burleigh Grimes or Home Run Baker, or any number of players before my time play. But their exploits on the diamond were well-known because we had the interest in early baseball history. The same could be said of the other kids my age in the early 1960s.

"Today, sadly and tragically, history is a lost art. If the kid (or the adult) can't remember it, they don't care to find about it either. I've written four Sox team histories with the hope of educating and informing Sox fans, but it is hopeless."

A Sox ambassador, like Kittle, until his death at 89, Minoso apparently played too far in the past for the awareness of fans who don't study the game.

"Recent generations really don't appreciate or understand history especially when you are talking about going back 50 years or more," said Sox historian Mark Liptak, a contributor to the Chicago Baseball Museum. "Minnie's 'glory days' with the Sox were during the 'Golden Age' of White Sox baseball, primarily during the 1950s...that's 60 years ago. Plus television footage or even film of that time period is rare. The Sox don't have much of it themselves, by their own admission, so it's not like they can help 'educate' younger fans about those days.

"That's why I always take these things with a grain of salt. It's really hard to choose 'the best ever' when those doing the voting really don't know or understand what they are voting on."

Litpak picks “Shoeless Joe” Jackson as the all-time Sox left fielder. Lindberg chooses Jackson, Minoso, Carl Reynolds and a “few others whose names mean nothing to this generation” over Kittle.

Historical acumen on Landis

Tribune readers were spot-on in other all-time Chicago picks to date. Oddly, they showed historical know-how that made the Kittle/Minoso deal even more puzzling.

They selected Billy Williams as all-time Cubs left fielder. For center, they picked Jim Landis – who flanked Minoso in the outfield -- for the Sox and Hack Wilson for the Cubs. The keystone combos were no brainers: shortstop, Luke Appling (Sox) and Ernie Banks (Cubs), and second base, Nellie Fox (Sox) and Ryne Sandberg (Cubs).

Kittle put in a word for Bill Melton for third, given his power history in a bigger ball-park in old Comiskey. But the fans picked right in Robin Ventura (Sox) and Ron Santo (Cubs). Since there was no DH, Frank Thomas was fine at first for the Sox, leaving out Paul Konerko, to match with Mark Grace for the Cubs.

An argument could be made for the likes of Derrek Lee, Frank Chance or Cap Anson over Grace. Anson played in prehistoric times before 1900, so that rules him out with today’s voter. I would nix Anson because of his racism. Grace played 13 seasons as a Cubs starter in modern times, much of his career with Harry Caray extolling his virtues. His longevity combined with 2,201 hits, a .308 average and .386 on-base percentage as a Cub make Grace a legit choice.

The right-field candidates, published on Aug. 12, should produce a debatable winner for both teams.



Before Will Harold Baines' (left) career run production carry weight over Jermaine Dye's more recent Sox heroics?

The Sox ballot featured Harold Baines, Jermaine Dye and Magglio Ordonez. Does 2005 World Series MVP Dye get it over all-time run-producer Baines? The Cubs side pits Sammy Sosa against Andre Dawson, Kiki Cuyler, Bill “Swish” Nicholson and Keith Moreland. Still unwelcome at Cubs events, Sosa should win hands-down, but the vote could still be tinged with fans upset at Sosa’s PED connections and last-day walkout in the 2004 season.

Interestingly, when the Cubs polled fans on their All-Century team in 1999, both Sosa and Dawson earned places in right field.

Any vote involving players from the past is always shrouded in dispute. The Hall of Fame balloting, especially for the old-timers committee, is annually a controversy. What I’d like to see is a couple of the Kittle voters come forward to explain their votes in the manner their winning recipient did.