

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Jokester Klein mined gold in Minoso's sore body parts

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Robert Klein loves self-generated sound effects and body English emphasis in his comic act.

But like the veteran pitcher nearing 40, the 75-year-old jokester can't summon his vintage fastball when he needs it. In this case, reviving his old Minnie Minoso on-stage thread.

"I did a routine about him holding the record being hit by pitched balls," Klein said of the late, fearless White Sox great. "So I made up a fictitious (slapping) noise for being hit by a pitch. I can't do that noise anymore of a ball being hit. My tongue won't operate like that.



Robert Klein once had Minnie Minoso as a sound-effects, body English part of his act.

"When I did the routine, it was Chicago (tongue slap), St. Louis (tongue slap), and each time I'd get hit in the head. His (HBP) record was broken by Ron Hunt. I said they'd meet once a year together and show two goofy guys who were hit in the head too many times."

Klein then followed Minoso to the end of his career...whenever.

"It was a nice gesture when the Sox brought him back for technically a fifth decade (1980)," he said. "A guy like him, he could have made his debut earlier (if not for the color line)."

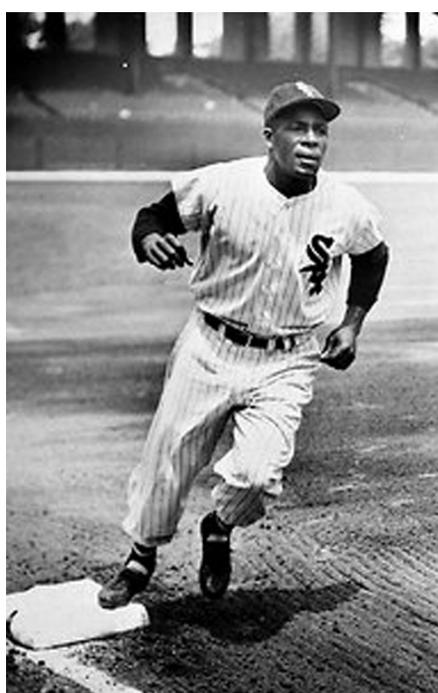
Klein did not channel Minoso from second-hand information. He watched Minnie in his Sox prime in the 1950s at Yankee Stadium, his home away from home in his native Bronx.

And he'd go on to weave in sports in an act that has entertained millions nationally for nearly 50 years, since appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. One joke has Klein, wear-

ing his Jewishness on his sleeve, doing an Atlanta Braves tomahawk chop while chanting a cantorial liturgy.

Chicago-area fans will get a chance to see the ol' master at work. Doing a 360 in his career, Klein is staging a concert at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie on Aug. 12 – 52 years after he got his big show-business break teaming with Fred Willard and learning improv comedy at Second City.

Klein would go on to do the *Tonight Show* nearly 90 times with Johnny Carson, Jay Leno and Jimmy Fallon. He guested with David Letterman on some 40 shows. Klein starred in nine HBO specials and four comedy albums. Letterman, Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Maher said Klein was their role model for modern comedy, turning old vaudevillian style into modern, hip, observational routines.



Whoever thought Minnie Minoso's talent for attracting hit-by-pitches would provide comic relief?

Always, always, Klein found his way to ballparks in his spare time. While in Chicago, he watched games at Wrigley Field and old Comiskey Park. Though a New Yorker, he's thankful the Cubs got the monkey off their back.

"The (past Wrigley and Tribune Co.) ownership should be ashamed of themselves," he said. "Filling the stadium for almost every game all those years. It's a disgrace. It's like the Jets, on a much smaller scale, not winning since 1969.

"It's a Cubs town, let's face it."

Klein has triumphed and suffered, although not as much as Chicago fans.

"My father took me to Yankee Stadium when I was 7," he said. "I saw the Philly Athletics. I'm a New York rooter – Yanks first, Mets second; Giants first, Jets second; Knicks first, Nets second. Hockey not so much.

"You see how difficult it is to have a dynasty. When I was a kid, the Yankees won almost every year."

Yanks' dynastic journey committed to memory

To display his encyclopedic memory of the Casey Stengel/Ralph Houk dynasty, Klein ad-libbed the Bronx Bombers' dynastic fate through his childhood and young adulthood:

- "Won in '47, beat the Dodgers.
- "1948, Indians beat the Braves.
- "1949, Yanks beat the Dodgers.

- “1950 Yanks beat the Phils.
- “1951 Yanks beat the Giants.
- “1952 Yanks beat the Dodgers.
- “1953- Yanks beat the Dodgers.
- “1954 Giants beat Cleveland. Willie Mays basket catch.
- “1955. Really bad year for me. The Dodgers finally won. My sister (mocked), ‘They LOST the World Series. They LOST the World Series.’ Your parents get cranky when you try to kill your sister.
- “1956. They came back and beat the Dodgers again.
- “1957. The Braves beat them.
- “1958. They beat the Braves.
- “1959. White Sox played the Dodgers, Billy Pierce.
- “1960. Tony Kubek got hit in the throat.
- “1961. They beat Cincinnati in five.
- “1962. They beat the Giants in seven, a lot of rain delays.
- “1963. They lost to the Dodgers in four straight.
- “1964. They lost to the Cardinals. The dynasty was over. Mickey was old.”

Klein could pay thousands for front-row seats in the third incarnation of a Yankee Stadium he has attended. But like many others, an afternoon at the ballpark doesn't have the same appeal.

“The thrill is off about going to the field,” he said. “When I was a kid, (seeing) the green (was big). It's so comfortable with my 70-inch television to see the game. I'm on celeb row for the Knicks at the (Madison Square) Garden. You get great VIP treatment for nothing. I watch so many of the games on TV. Maybe I'm getting old.”

With his Skokie concert, though, he's still sure he's in the right business.

“The world should be glad I wasn't a doctor because I would have killed people,” said the man, who like Minoza, took some hits and brickbats, but has longevity on his side.