

Making the Case for Minnie Minoso



Associated Press photo

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By Stuart Miller

It turns out that Minnie Minoso, the former Chicago White Sox star, is being remembered for the wrong decades — and it just might keep him from achieving baseball's greatest individual honor.

The Baseball Hall of Fame veterans committee just announced its new ballot of Golden Era ballplayers — those who played from 1946 to 1973 but were not elected by the sportswriters who control the first round of voting. The two biggest names are Ron Santo and Gil Hodges, sentimental favorites because they are so close to Hall of Fame greatness and they were beloved figures on great teams.

When I saw the list I thought I would re-evaluate whether Santo and Hodges belonged. But before I started, I looked at Minoso, whom I remember fondly from my childhood only because Bill Veeck got so much publicity for bringing back the Cuban-born star to appear briefly in 1976 (picking up a single in eight at-bats at age 50) and 1980 in a White Sox uniform so he could say he played in five decades. (Yes, I was geeky — I loved Bill Veeck's autobiography as a child.)

It turns out that I was focused on the wrong decades. The two decades that matter most in remembering Minoso are the 1950s and the 2000s. The latter is vital because it has brought us a newly sophisticated approach to statistical analysis with an emphasis on numbers like on-base percentage, wins above replacement and wins probability added. Looking at those numbers it is easy to argue that Minoso was one of the top hitters in the American League for the entire 1950s (and no statistic factors in the extra challenges of being dark-skinned and Spanish-speaking in baseball in the early 1950s).

In fact, even a glance at more basic statistics yields a compelling case for Minoso — in a 10-year span beginning in 1951, he finished in the top 10 in batting average eight times, and in the top 10 in steals nine times (leading the league three of those years and finishing second another three times). But he was no mere singles hitter — he was top 10 in doubles eight times (leading the A.L. once) and top 10 in triples six times (leading three times); he even finished 10th in homers

twice. Similarly, while he was top 10 in runs scored nine times, he also landed in the top 10 in RBI five times. And while I believe Gold Gloves are often handed out for the wrong reasons, he did manage to add three to his mantel.

But the more modern statistics paint an even more vivid picture of Minoso as an overlooked Hall of Famer. For starters, he had five years with an on-base percentage over .400, he was always at .374 or higher, and only once in the decade was he not in the top 10. His mix of walks and gap power meant he was in the top 10 in OPS (on-base plus slugging) eight times in 10 years. (And Minoso would do whatever it took to get on base.)

As I wrote in the Times in 2010, in the early years of integration, minorities were victimized by beanballs at a dispiriting rate. But Minoso, who took 192 for the team in his career, was far and away the tops—he was hit more than any batter in the A.L. every year but one from 1951 through 1961. It wasn't just prejudice, Minoso crowded the plate and was skilled at leaning in and taking a ball in the side to get on.)

Looking at Baseball Reference's Wins Above Replacement — the statistic that analyzes how many more wins a player brings his team than a replacement-level minor leaguer — buffs Minoso's credentials and potential Hall plaque to a bright finish. Seven times he was among the top five in the American League for WAR among position players, and twice — in 1954 and 1959 — he ranked first. (His numbers are nearly as impressive — top 10 instead of top 5 — for Wins Probability Added.)

Now here's another stat, from another decade, the 1920s. For years, Minoso's birthdate was listed as Nov. 29, 1925. But there seems to be more evidence arguing that he was born in 1922. That means that when Minoso had his breakout rookie year in 1951, hitting .326 and leading the league in triples and steals, he was already 28. Look back at the years he played in the Negro Leagues after coming to America (1946-1948) and the ones in which Cleveland stuck him in the minors where he decimated pitchers throughout the Pacific Coast League (1949-1950) and you can't help but wonder what might have been. If Minoso had even three extra major league seasons he might have come close to 2,500 hits, and he certainly would have had a shot at racking up three more Hall of Fame caliber seasons.

And yet, Minoso doesn't need the "what might have been" defense. He was one of the top offensive threats in the A.L. in the 1950s and a strong defensive player too. He may not be as obvious a choice as some of his peers (like Willie Mays) but we can clearly look back across the decades and see that Minnie Minoso belongs in the Hall of Fame.