



Sox's Abreu latest chapter in Chicago's long history of Cuban players

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Friday, November 8, 2013*

History stared Jose Abreu squarely in the face upon his arrival at U.S. Cellular Field.

And the White Sox's newest Cuban player returned the greeting.

Sitting front and center that recent day as free-agent arrival Abreu was introduced to Chicago was Minnie Minoso, pushing 90, and the man from whom much inspiration springs for any Cuban player coming to the United States. In turn, Abreu said he was inspired by all the Cuban players who have come before him. Later, Minoso and Abreu posed together on the field.

If Minoso was a kind of godfather to Abreu, then Alexei Ramirez and Dayan Viciedo were official team greeters. The presence of both Cubans was a key spur for Abreu to sign with the Sox. Shortstop Ramirez had been a former teammate in Cuba. So he'll have a locker-room comfort zone adjusting to a new team and new culture in his first Sox season in 2014.

If slugging first baseman Abreu -- whose tall, strapping frame gives a hint of Cuban-born Tony Perez -- wanted to play for a franchise that had tradition with his countrymen, he picked the right one. The history of Cubans in Chicago baseball is long, but never more illustrious than with the White Sox. The Cubs had far fewer Cubans, mostly as a result of practically ignoring the first wave of prime Latin talent from the 1950s on-



Hall of Fame-worthy Minnie Minoso is the patron saint of Cubans in Chicago baseball. Photo credit Associated Press.

ward. There was one important exception – the Cubs briefly employed the city’s only Cuban-born manager in Preston Gomez.

Minoso is the patron saint of Cubans in Chicago baseball. Now a Sox ambassador and a year-round Chicagoan, he has a historical impact far beyond that of being a part of the talent pipeline from his homeland. “The Cuban Comet” broke Chicago baseball’s color line on May 1, 1951, more than four years after Jackie Robinson’s debut.

Minoso welcomed with open arms

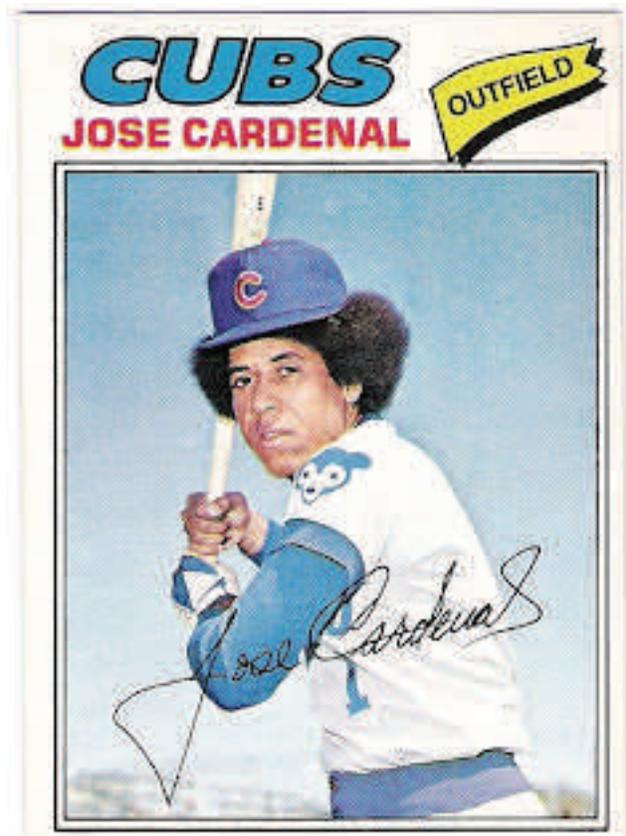
But unlike the brickbats along with the bouquets Robinson received in 1947, the city was more than ready for Minoso. He was welcomed with open arms from Day One, and he’s more than returned the favor, always coming back into the Sox fold despite subsequent tours of duty with the Indians and Cardinals and Senators.

Minoso’s arrival also was a landmark for his countrymen. He was the majors’ first black Cuban.

Like the other Caribbean islands, Cuba is a mixed-race country with many tracing their ancestry to the African slaves imported starting in the 16th century. Before baseball’s integration with Robinson, the only Cubans who could play in the majors were light-skinned men with European features. As one description of the day proclaimed, the players had to be of “pure Castillian soap,” tracing their roots back to Spain with no interbreeding with those of African ancestry.

That said, the fortunate Caucasian Cubans were the first group of Latin players in baseball with the game well-developed in Cuba, occupied by the United States in the Spanish-American War in 1898. Travel was easy between Cuba and Florida, 90 miles away. Some 17 Cubans played in the majors between 1911 and 1929. Pitcher Dolf Luque won 194 games for four teams. Interestingly, these “white” Cubans could double dip. They were welcomed on Negro League teams’ rosters.

Also a Negro League veteran, Minoso hit a homer in his first Sox game and didn’t stop. Playing with enthusiasm and all-out hustle, he racked up four 100-RBI seasons with 1,373 hits and a .304 average in five different tenures with the Sox. The final two were past age 50 in 1976 and 1980 as another Bill Veeck promotional stunt.



Jose Cardenal was productive on the field and colorful off of it, his huge Afro his trademark.

Minoso may have been singularly the greatest individual Cuban on the South Side. But the true golden age of the products of the baseball-mad island has been in the last decade.

Two Cuban pitchers, Jose Contreras and Orlando “El Duque” Hernandez, were crucial in 2005 to the only World Series won by a Chicago team since 1917. The Sox had to first hold off a Cleveland Indians team that had a mad second-half surge, then nearly ran the table with lights-out pitching in the postseason. Contreras and Hernandez were at the center of it all.

Contreras was one of Sox pitching coach Don Cooper’s most prominent reclamation projects. Given a quick hook by the Yankees after coming over from Cuba for the 2003 season, he was traded to the Sox for former 20-game-winner Estaban Loaiza on July 31, 2004. Cooper shaped him up to go 15-7 with a 3.61 ERA to help lead the strong 2005 rotation. He saved his best for last by going 3-1 in four starts in the post-season with one complete game as the Sox went 11-1 against the Red Sox, Angels and Astros to win it all.

The sidearming Contreras was 13-9 for the under-performing 2006 Sox, then stuck around in a declining mode through 2009. He’ll always have 2005, though.

El Duque turned the tide vs. Red Sox

Contreras had company in Hernandez, who had been his Yankees teammate for 1 ½ seasons. Also a New York castoff, El Duque was pushing 40 and near the end as he became the Sox’s fifth starter in 2005 with a 9-9 record. Yet he did his best work of the year in the bullpen, delivering the key out in the ALDS clincher against the Red Sox on Oct. 7 at Fenway Park.

With the Red Sox rallying in the bottom of the sixth, the White Sox clung to a 4-3 lead. Hernandez was summoned with the bases loaded and none out in relief of Damaso Marte, who in turn had come in for starter Freddy Garcia. Hernandez got the first two out, ran the count full to Johnny Damon and then got him with a not-so-checked swing for strike three on his filthy drop pitch coming out of his unorthodox delivery.

Ramirez and Vicedo locker next to each other at The Cell. Ramirez was an immediate success as a Sox in 2008, playing a season at second base before shifting to his natural shortstop position. A deft fielder who had a puzzling slump in the field in 2013, Ramirez was quickly nicknamed the “Cuban Missile” for his career-highs of 21 homers and .290 average in his rookie season. His production has leveled off ever since, but Ramirez when healthy remains a decent offensive threat.

Much was expected of Vicedo when he first came to the Sox in 2010. Impressing with power and average in small doses at the big-league level, the chunky third baseman excelled in the minors in 2011, prompting repeated calls from his promotion. He took over the left-field job in 2012, slugging 25 homers, but also showing lack of plate disci-



Luis Aloma, 18-3 in his four-year career, started the Sox's Cuban Connection in 1950.

pline. Viciado slumped in 2013 with the rest of the Sox, but his youth – he’s still just 24 – will prompt the Sox to exercise more patience.

Jose Acosta was the Sox’s first Cuban player, pitching in five games in 1922. He and his brother, Merito Acosta, were products of the Senators organization, which had an early Cuban talent pipeline.

Early 1950s Sox Cuban Connection



Sandy Consuegra was 16-3 for the 1954 Sox.

The Sox’s Cuban Connection was quiet until 1950. Then, within three years, the Sox had the biggest Cuban contingent in the majors, centered around Minoso. They were far more prominent on the Sox than three African-Americans who played in more limited roles through 1953. They were backup catcher Sam Hairston, sometimes-first baseman Bob Boyd and pitcher Connie Johnson.

First of the Cuban wave, preceding Minoso, was right-hander Luis Aloma in 1950. For a pitcher who had a limited impact in his four-year big-league career, all on the South Side, Aloma had an amazing record. He was a composite 18-3 over 116 games, all but one in relief, through 1953.

Minoso then had two more Spanish conversation partners in 1952. Hector Rodriguez became the team’s second Cuban regular at third base for one season. Logging less time at shortstop was Willy Miranda, who’d go on to have a few good seasons with the Orioles.

Two more Cubans arrived in 1953: right-handers Sandy Consuegra and Mike Fornieles.

Consuegra was sensational in 1954, leading the American League with an .842 winning percentage with his 16-3 mark split between the rotation and bullpen. In each of his three full Sox seasons, Consuegra had an ERA of 2.64 or below. Fornieles also was a swingman as a Sox, before moving on. He was a 1961 All-Star with the Red Sox.

Middle-inning reliever Rudy Arias was the lone Cuban on the 1959 AL champion White Sox. Arias did not pitch in the World Series.

Only four more Cuban-born players appeared with the Sox up until Hernandez and Contreras in 2004-05: Aurelio Monteagudo in 1967, Leo Sutherland in 1980-81, Nelson Santovenia in 1992 and an out-of-place Jose Canseco in 2001.

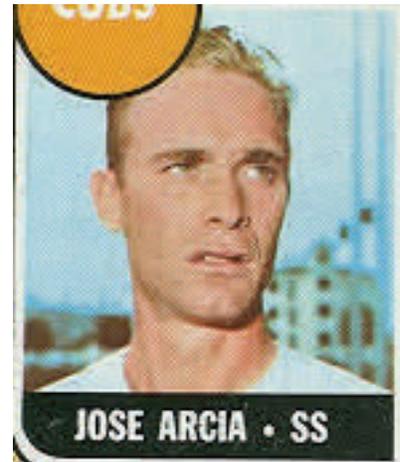
Eight miles north, the Cubs’ Cuban tradition was much thinner. Mike Gonzalez, who first distinguished himself on the Cardinals, served as a backup catcher to Gabby Hartnett from 1925 to 1929. Gonzalez had one-at bat in the star-crossed 1929 World Series.

Latin players were few and far between on the North Side over the next four-plus decades. White Puerto Rican Hi Bithorn was an 18-game winner in 1943 before Navy service throttled his career. Oddly enough, the third player of color on the Cubs, after Ernie Banks and Gene Baker, was outfielder Luis Marquez, a black Puerto Rican, early in the 1954 season. A product of the Braves' organization, Marquez, a frequent pinch runner, played in 17 games, but got just 12 at-bats before being traded to Pittsburgh.

Taylor Cubs' first Cuban regular

The Cubs' first Cuban regular was second baseman Tony Taylor, obtained from the Giants organization via the Rule 5 draft, in 1958. Taylor had an excellent season getting on base in front of MVP Banks in 1959, but was traded to the Phillies for Don Cardwell one month into the 1960 season when the Cubs were again in desperate need of pitching.

Cubs general manager John Holland, an acolyte of clueless owner Phil Wrigley, simply did not trust Latin scouts, figuring they would sign their relatives and friends. So, almost by accident, the Cubs might have a Mexican pitcher in Marcelino Solis (1958), a Dominican shortstop in Roberto Pena (1965-66) or a mercurial Panamanian outfielder in Adolfo Phillips (1966-69).



Jose Arcia had his one day in the sun for the Cubs in 1968.

One Cuban had a memorable – just one – day in the sun for the Cubs on July 7, 1968. Tall and lanky (6-foot-3, 170-pound) Jose Arcia had very short playing time. A middle infielder by trade, he logged just 89 at-bats for Leo Durocher's '68 team as Glenn Beckert, Don Kessinger and Ron Santo each recorded at least 682 plate appearances in Durocher's play 'em-'till-they-drop system.

Durocher went against his grain by summoning Arcia to play center in the seventh inning of the first game of a Sunday Wrigley Field doubleheader against the Pirates. With the score tied 4-4, Arcia led off the ninth with a game-winning homer against Pirates southpaw Bob Veale. Jack Brickhouse went nuts in his call, exclaiming Arcia was one "happy Cuban." That was his only homer of a career that took him to duty as a semi-regular on horrid original Padres teams in 1969-70.

Four years later, the most productive Cuban in Cubs history arrived to produce on the field and entertain both on and off of it. The Cubs traded another Brock – outfielder Brock Davis – but this time came out ahead in snaring outfielder Jose Cardenal from the Milwaukee Brewers during the 1971 winter meetings. Cardenal immediately provided the Cubs speed and dash on the basepaths on a team that had possessed no such quality for decades.

Topped by an oversized Afro sticking out from under his cap, Cardenal was a .300 hitter who occasionally could belt one onto Waveland Avenue with surprising power from his 5-foot-10, 150-pound frame. Sometimes his managers batted him in the middle of

the lineup. Cardenal came through in the clutch enough to be named Chicago Player of the Year by sportswriters in 1973.

But he was as well-known for his antics as his play. Cardenal missed one game because he claimed a chirping cricket kept him up all night. He also was sidelined due to a “stuck eyelid.” Cardenal reportedly stashed baseballs in the Wrigley Field vines to pull out at opportune times in claiming ground-rule doubles. Wife Pat also made headlines, accused of tussling with a police officer at O’Hare Airport.

All of which made Cardenal a favorite of owner Phil Wrigley. But things changed after the boss’ death in 1977. Cardenal fell out of favor with new manager Herman Franks, losing his left-field job to the likes of Greg Gross and Gene Clines. He went on to be a productive spare part with the Phillies.

Gomez gets quick hook as manager

Gomez then became a surprising pick as Cubs manager after Frank quit in a huff near the end of the 1979 season. While fans clamored for GM Bob Kennedy to name Whitey Herzog as manager, old baseball war-horse Gomez, 57, got the job instead.

Gomez had been a longtime Dodgers coach during their prime Sandy Koufax-led seasons in the 1960s, then was the Padres’ original manager in 1969. Gomez succeeded Durocher as Astros manager in 1974. All went for naught for the talent-shredded Cubs. Kennedy pulled one of the quickest hooks in Cubs history by firing Gomez at the 1980 All-Star break with the team 38-52 and mired in last place after an 11-6 start.

Even as big-name baseball defectors from Fidel Castro’s closed state began to be available to big-league teams as the 20th century waned, the Cubs stayed on the sidelines. They had the proverbial big-one-who-got-away from their own farm system in Cuban-born, Florida-raised Rafael Palmeiro.

Along with Mark Grace, Mississippi State product Palmeiro was a prime hitting prospect out of the Dallas Green-Gordon Goldsberry revived player development system. But after hitting .308 with 40 doubles in his first full season in 1988, Green successor Jim Frey traded Palmeiro to Texas in the Mitch Williams deal.

Frey, who had a too-quick trigger on trades, always lusted for the three-run homer. Palmeiro had slugged just eight homers in ’88, when the baseball had apparently been “de-juiced” after the big offensive spree of 1987. Frey never had second thoughts about dispatching Palmeiro. “I wanted someone who could hit the (bleep) out of the ball,” he said 15 years later. Connections with PEDs or not, Palmeiro became a legit long-ball producer in the 500-homer club. GM Jim Frey even looked into re-acquiring Palmeiro in mid-season 2003 before settling on Randall Simon as a boost for first base.



Management had a quick hook on Preston Gomez's Cubs manager's tenure in 1980.

The last Cuban-born player on the Cubs, for an eight-game cup of coffee in 1998, had a special distinction. Left-handed relief specialist Tony Fossas had been a Southern Baptist, but converted to Messianic Judaism. Fossas accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior, but otherwise practiced classic Jewish rituals and traditions.

Now, Abreu has the chance to write the next chapter in a near-century-long storyline of a proud people's baseball representation in Chicago.