

Minoso 'Hurts' but Won't Stop Believin'

By Paul Ladewski

It could have been one of the greatest Chicago baseball stories ever, all right.

After decades of frustration and disappointment, Ron Santo and Minnie Minoso could have been elected to the Hall of Fame together. Two players, two teams, one town. It would have taken place one year after Santo passed away and 50 years after Minoso became the first White Sox player to break the color barrier.

If only a few minds had changed last week, the dream would have become reality. While Santo slammed a tape-measure home run as a near-unanimous selection – he was named on 15-of-16 ballots -- Minoso fell three votes short of 12 required for election, the equivalent of a loud foul ball.

“What can you do?” said Minoso, who crossed paths with Santo many times at charity golf tournaments over the years. “What do people expect me to say? I will not complain about it. I won't open my mouth and say anything bad about anybody. It's not my style. I will always smile even if I hurt inside.

“But I will tell you this – I am very happy for Ron Santo and his family. He was a good man and a great ballplayer.”

As Santo supporters will tell you, the road to Cooperstown, N.Y., can be a long and bumpy one. The former Cubs third baseman was eligible for 32 years before he made the cut finally.

While Minoso came up short in his latest bid, there was more reason for hope this time. Aided by an aggressive campaign, which included a symposium at U.S. Cellular Field last month, the ex-White Sox outfielder was named on 56 percent of the ballots. In 15 tries on the Baseball Writers Association of America ballot, he had never realized more than 21 percent of the vote.

Only Santo and former pitcher Jim Kaat (10) received more votes than Minoso in the most recent election.

“We're encouraged by the fact that his achievements were brought to light,” his wife Sharon said. “Before then, not even we realized that his statistics were this good. We're thankful for the players, the media and the White Sox organization who gave Minnie so much support. It overwhelmed us.

“Naturally, we're disappointed. It would have been great for Chicago to have a Cubs and a White Sox player inducted in the same year. But Minnie is a trooper that way. He understands that it wasn't meant to be this time. Life goes on.”

It's premature to say whether the Minoso camp can sustain the momentum for three years, when the Golden Era committee will stage its next election. A lot can change between now and then. For one, the make-up of the group is certain to be different.

At the same time, the heightened awareness for Minoso and his achievements can't possibly hurt his Hall of Fame bid. It should ensure him a spot on the ballot at the very least.

For much of one decade and part of another, both players were among the elite major league players at their positions – Santo at third base, Minoso in left field. Both spent the brunt of their careers in Chicago. Both were maintstays on some very good teams that weren't quite good enough to play on the October stage.

Statistically, Santo and Minoso have career totals that are in the same ballpark. Here's the breakdown:

	Santo	Minoso
Plate appearances	9,396	7,710
Batting average	.277	.298

OPS	.826	.846
Hits	2,254	1,963
Home runs	331	186
Stolen bases	35	205
Runs	1,138	1,136
RBI	1,342	1,023

If Minofo had the same number of plate appearances, his career totals would be 2,392 hits, 1,384 runs, 1,247 RBI, 227 home runs and 250 stolen bases. In that case, the overall difference between the Hall of Fame hopefuls would be marginal – Santo would lead in RBI and home runs, Minofo would have the edge in hits, runs and stolen bases.

If not for the color barrier, Minofo almost certainly would have played three more seasons, or roughly 1,688 more plate appearances. According to official baseball records, the Cuba native was 25 years old in his first full major league season, five years older than when Santo became an everyday player.

What's more, if Minofo had started his career earlier, he likely would have been a career .300 hitter, a magic number that is widely considered to be a standard of excellence.

In the field, Santo was a five-time Gold Glove-winner, while Minofo had three such awards at a lesser position. The honor was established in 1957, by which time Minofo was in his seventh season already.

Indeed, the most significant difference between Santo and Minofo may have little if anything to do with actual performance. It may have more to do with staying power, the ability to remain in the public consciousness after retirement as a player.

Santo spent 20 seasons in the broadcast booth, where he maintained a large audience. In that time, he also did much to raise awareness of diabetes and raised considerable money to fight the disease. Even three decades later, Santo was visible off the field and perhaps even more popular than he had been on it.

Meanwhile, Santo's percentage climbed in seven of his final nine years on the BWAA ballot. In 1989, his final year under consideration, it peaked at 43.1 percent. After he became a radio analyst one year later, his case continued to build momentum. In 2007, he realized 69.5 percent of the vote in the veterans committee election.

“There's no doubt that it can help a player to be in the public eye after he his retirement,” one veteran baseball writer and longtime Hall of Fame voter told the Chicago Baseball Museum. “In Santo's case, his years as a broadcaster certainly didn't hurt his chances. I don't know what role if any the Hall of Fame had in his decision to become a broadcaster, but it allowed him to remain visible. He's not the only retired player who got into the Hall of Fame after he remained active in baseball in another capacity.”

At 86, which is his listed age, Minofo said he would continue to be active in the game. He will continue to promote baseball as a good-will ambassador for the organization.

“I won't change,” he promised. “I will be the same. I want to help baseball. I want to honor my country. No ballplayer tried harder than Minnie Minofo – nobody. I will continue to give 100 percent.”

Minofo has faith that he will join Santo in the Hall of Fame one day. His wish is that, unlike his former golf buddy, he will be around to enjoy it.

“I want to be here when it happens, but only God can make that decision,” Minofo said. “I told Him, 'Let me be here if it happens, and I will do anything you want of me.' I will continue to believe.”