

Minnie Minoso died from tear in pulmonary artery: autopsy

By **Fred Mitchell**
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Baseball has lost another iconic ambassador.

Former White Sox star outfielder Minnie Minoso was found dead in the driver's seat of his car early Sunday.

An autopsy performed Sunday afternoon determined Minoso died of a tear in his pulmonary artery caused by "chronic obstructive pulmonary disease." The White Sox and his family said he was 90.

Just over a month after the death of Cubs legend Ernie Banks, Chicago fans and longtime followers of baseball worldwide now mourn the death of Minoso, known as the "Cuban Comet."

Chicago's first black major league player, Minoso was much more than a consummate ballplayer.

"I didn't know Minnie until I bought the club in 1981, but the first time I met him I fell in love with his infectious personality and his love for the White Sox," White Sox Chairman Jerry Reinsdorf said Sunday. "He was just one of the most genuine people that you would ever want to know."

Minoso was driving home from a friend's birthday party when he apparently fell ill and pulled over in the Lakeview neighborhood, according to police and family.

He was found unresponsive in the driver's seat of his car near a gas station in the 2800 block of North Ashland Avenue around 1 a.m., according to police. There were no signs of trauma and Minoso was pronounced dead at the scene at 1:09 a.m., police said.

President Barack Obama, a lifelong Sox fan, released a statement that included the following:

"For South Siders and Sox fans all across the country, including me, Minnie Minoso is and will always be 'Mr. White Sox.' ... Minnie may have been passed over by the Baseball Hall of Fame during his lifetime, but for me and for generations of black and Latino young people, Minnie's quintessentially American story embodies far more than a plaque ever could."

Cubs Chairman Tom Ricketts issued a statement saying the team was "deeply saddened by the passing of Minnie Minoso. Having recently lost one of our all-time greats, Ernie Banks, we share the heartache with the White Sox organization and fans everywhere who were blessed to enjoy the talent, heart and passion of Mr. White Sox."

Minoso's son Charlie Rice-Minoso said: "He was an extraordinary person. He made many contributions to baseball and to Chicago. He'll be missed most by his family and closest friends.

"He had so many amazing relationships with people," he added, choking up. "It was just amazing to see that, even so

many years after he played, to see how he was respected. We're just eternally grateful.”

Billy Pierce, a former star White Sox pitcher and teammate of Minoso, said he could tell Minoso was not feeling well recently.

“I had been with him at SoxFest, and he had to stop two or three times when we were walking because it was tough getting his breath,” Pierce told the Tribune. “He wasn’t real well then, and from what I had been told, at Christmastime he had to go into the hospital because he had the same problem.”

Minoso’s birthday was listed on baseball-reference.com as Nov. 29, 1925, but some believed he was as old as 92. When asked about his age, he once said, “Look what they say in the Sox record book.”

Rice-Minoso said the family is going with 90.

“That's the number we have down in Spanish documents. That's the date,” he said. “It's kind of a running joke. That was the one topic he didn't want to focus on, so of course that's what everyone wanted to know.”

Born in Cuba, Orestes “Minnie” Minoso came to the United States in 1945 and played three seasons for the New York Cubans in the Negro Leagues. Bill Veeck, then owner of the Indians, purchased his contract in September 1948. He made his major league debut in 1949, playing nine late-season games for the Indians.

After spending 1950 in the minors, Minoso came to the Sox in an early season trade in 1951. He became the Sox’s and Chicago’s first black player on May 1, 1951. Minoso wasted no time making his presence felt, getting two hits and two RBIs in an 8-3 loss to the Yankees. He quickly electrified Comiskey Park, hitting .326 to finish second in AL Rookie of the Year voting.

It was just the start for Minoso. In 1954, he had his second straight fourth-place finish in AL Most Valuable Player voting, hitting .320 with 19 homers, 18 triples, 19 stolen bases, 116 RBIs and 119 runs. He played in nine All-Star Games.

“I felt Minnie was the one player in the American League who had that intangible quality of excitement that makes fans talk about him when they leave the park,” Frank Lane, the general manager who brought Minoso to the White Sox, once said.

The Sox retired his No. 9 in 1983. However, Minoso’s appeal went beyond Chicago. He was regarded as the first Latin American superstar, inspiring young players who dreamed of joining him in the big leagues.

Minoso spoke broken English, but his vibrant smile and enduring love for the game translated clearly everywhere.

“He and I would talk, and I had to say, ‘Minnie, what did you say?’ But I don’t think he ever said a nasty thing about anybody. It was always good, always friendly,” Pierce said.

“He was a great friend. We have been friends ever since 1951. I run a cancer golf outing and he came out to it every year. He never played golf, but he would get in the cart and go around and visit with the people and talk to the people. He did a lot of good for us, that’s for sure.”

Minoso’s combination of speed and power led a White Sox revival in the 1950s. He finished with a .298 batting

average and .389 on-base percentage. Bill James, the noted baseball statistics analyst, rated Minoso the 10th best left fielder of all time in 2001.

“He was one of the top guys getting hit (by pitches) because he stood close to the plate,” Pierce said. “I remember him getting hit in the head and playing right through it. He played through many injuries. He was a real, 100 percent ballplayer. He’d give the ballclub 100 percent all the time, and he gave the fans 100 percent. That’s why they all loved him.”

Minoso’s love of the game led to him famously playing in the majors for parts of five decades. He got his last major league hit in 1976 and came back for two more at-bats in 1980.

In his later years, the colorful Minoso, much like Banks with the Cubs, served as one of the team’s top goodwill ambassadors.

“I’m proud of everything,” Minoso once said of his career. “I’m proud to be a baseball player.”

The White Sox issued a statement that began, “Mr. White Sox has died.”

The Minoso family also released a formal statement:

“Our entire family appreciates the kind expressions of concern, sympathy and compassion from so many of our friends and fans of the White Sox during this most difficult time. Minnie lived a full life of joy and happiness, surrounded always by friends and family. It is during moments like these that love matters most. Minnie enjoyed nothing more than to be at the ballpark cheering on his White Sox. For Minnie, every day was a reason to smile, and he would want us all to remember him that way, smiling at a ballgame.

“As he so often said, ‘God bless you, my friends.’ “

Minoso is survived by his wife of 30 years, Sharon, two sons, Orestes Jr. and Charlie, and two daughters, Marilyn and Cecilia. Funeral arrangements are pending.

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