

September 23, 1990---

The first wind of autumn cuts the deepest, and it was the last stiff breeze Minnie Minoso softened at Comiskey Park. On the White Sox' most recent homestand - before Friday's directive from baseball commissioner Fay Vincent not to activate Minoso - the former outfielder was smiling like fresh bait and signing autographs for a sea of fans bundled up near home plate.

The glory of having Minoso get one at-bat, enabling him to become the first player to appear in major-league games in six decades, already was diminished by front-office static and the widely reported Ozzie Guillen quote. Guillen said, "Oakland gets Willie McGee and Harold Baines. We get Minnie Minoso and Jerry Hairston."

Then, on Friday, the commissioner detonated the blast from the past. According to White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf, "Minnie had taken batting practice, and we had satisfied ourselves that he could have competed." Reinsdorf didn't explain Vincent's decision, but it had been reported that some baseball officials thought Minoso's reappearance was a publicity stunt that would hurt baseball's integrity.

Wait a minute.

There were at least three reasons Minoso was fit to hit:

1. Minoso recently had to leave the park early. Seems he had to run home to help take care of his son, Charley Orestes Minoso III, who is 22 months old. The Baseball Encyclopedia says Minnie Minoso will be 68 Nov. 29. Minnie says he will be 66. What's a couple of years?

Nothing, of course, unless you are Charley Orestes Minoso III.

2. Appearing as a designated hitter, Minoso did get a base hit off California Angels left-hander Sid Monge in 1976. Minoso was 53, making him the oldest player in history to get a base hit. Minoso's ex-roommate Satchel Paige appeared in a major-league game at 59, but he was a pitcher.

3. Minoso looks happier and healthier than Baines and McGee.

"Obviously, I'm disappointed, but I accept and respect the decision," Minoso said in a statement released Friday by the White Sox. "Maybe the commissioner will let me play in the year 2,000."

Even the earlier controversy surrounding the comeback didn't bother Minoso. "What Ozzie said, he was joking a little bit," Minoso said last weekend, semi-retired

in Comiskey's Bards Room after hitting fungos. "I don't take too many things seriously. I used to play the game. I'm not trying to play to prove anything to anybody. I'm just in pretty good condition to play and to set a record no one has done."

Minoso said he already knew most of the White Sox players, having worked with them in spring training and touching base with them as the club's community relations representative. "But the ballplayer I used to be - that's not me anymore," he said. "I don't let those things confuse me."

Now, I'm like another rookie. I try not to take a space from anybody else, even the bat boy. I'm just here for a little while, passing through. If I need a baseball bat, I ask one of the players. I wanted to use (Dan) Pasqua's. His bats have beautiful balance. I asked him, and he gave me one. He told me any time I saw one I liked to go ahead and use it. (Ivan) Calderon gave me a new glove."

Minoso took light batting practice in preparation for his big Social Security swing. A couple of weeks ago, he played first base in a White Sox fantasy camp and has stayed in shape by participating in a few old-timer's games. Minoso started in right field when the Sox lost to the 1972-74 World Series champion Oakland A's in June at Comiskey Park. Minoso popped out in his only at-bat.

"A lot of the people I faced this year played in the Senior League," Minoso said. "They were throwing 85 to 90 m.p.h. No problem. A lot of people worry if I can still pick up the ball when it's going that fast. My eyes are good. So are my legs. I know how far I can go. I don't push myself anymore. If I think something is going to hurt me, I don't do it. For example, I don't run long distance anymore."

One thing that hadn't diminished was Minoso's intense pride.

He spoke in warm tones of his barnstorming days and nights with the New York Cubans between 1946 and 1948. With Minoso playing third base, (and 41-year-old Luis Tiant, Sr. going 10-0) the Cubans were the National League champions and Negro World Series Winners in 1947. Minoso recalls playing anybody, anywhere, including the bearded House of David team, based out of Brooklyn.

"I never thought I should have been in the major leagues," Minoso said. "I never had any idea the door (for integration) would be opened. I started to have more ambition and I started to believe in myself more after Jackie Robinson was signed."

"Then, I truly believed I should get better each day, each time at bat. When I got to the major leagues, I remember having a good day - maybe I went two for four, or I hit a home run, or whatever. After the game, I'd be in my (street) shirt and my (street) shoes and I'd have a beer, maybe a cigarette. I'd sit there like this:"

Minoso got real quiet and put down his fork. He stopped talking and stared off the

dinner table into another time. It was as if a cold tarp has been pulled over his heart.

"And I would think," he said. "Nellie Fox or someone would say, 'Hey, Minnie, what are you sitting there and thinking about? We just won the game and you had a hell of a day.' I'd say, 'Yes. But I'm thinking about the day I went 0 for 4 or made an error to lose a ball game. I have to remember those times. They'd always say:

" 'Minnie, you're something else.' "

Orestes Arrieta Armas Saturino Minoso - or Orestes - as Bill Veeck always called him - indeed, was something else. In a 17-year career (including an offer-two in 1980), Minoso hit .298 with 1,963 lifetime hits. His best year was 1954, when he hit .320 for the White Sox. Minoso's 19 home runs, 29 doubles and league-leading 18 triples helped contribute to a .535 slugging percentage. He played his first major-league game in 1949 with the Cleveland Indians.

White Sox fans best remember Minoso's flair for the dramatic. He hit a home run in his first at bat in a White Sox uniform in 1951. Then, on Opening Day 1960, after being traded back to the White Sox from Cleveland, Minoso hit a grand slam into the center field bullpen and then hit the game winning ninth inning home run into the left field upper deck.

They were feats befitting one of Cuba's greatest baseball exports. Now, his career apparently ends as it began. Minnie Minoso is shut out of baseball.