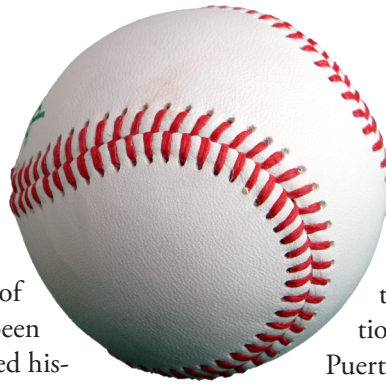


BASEBALL AND LATINOS

BY RAMÓN J. GUERRA



HISTORY AND ORIGINS

General History of Baseball:

Baseball has its origins in a variety of different ball and stick games that have been played throughout the world since recorded history. Popular belief of the invention of baseball at Cooperstown, New York by Abner Doubleday in 1839 has come to be regarded more as self-promoting myth and legend rather than historical fact. Instead, the game we know as baseball today has evolved and been pieced together over more than one hundred years from different games with names like paddleball, trap ball, one-old-cat, rounders, and town ball. There is also ample evidence to show the influence of British cricket on organized baseball, including much of the terminology and rules used in the game. During the midpoint of the nineteenth century, games like these were played across the country with a variety of different rules and, through slow contact, gradually became more and more unified. Town teams would travel in order to face other towns and spread the game in fierce rivalries. By 1869 the U.S. had its first professional baseball team in the Cincinnati Reds and by 1871 its first professional major league in the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players. In 1882 the American Association of Base Ball Clubs began play in opposition with the National Association. These leagues, after much competition, developed into the National League and the American League of today, where rules are identical and (with the exception of the designated hitter) the structure of the game is uniform.

Latin American Involvement:

The introduction of baseball to Latin America has much to do with the history of U.S. foreign military outposts and their dispersal of cultural traits, including sports and recreation, to the local people from the middle of the nineteenth century. Many in North America saw the Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean and

their attraction to baseball as a potential for North-South relations to be strengthened during this time, particularly when the control from European colonizers in the area was diminishing. U.S. occupation and involvement in countries like Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and others in the late 1890s and early 1900s led to servicemen playing the game and locals learning the intricacies of the popular American sport. Though the game had been introduced in the Caribbean earlier in the century through cultural exchange and labor migration, the added presence and involvement of the U.S. in the region at the end of the nineteenth century brought the relationship between Latin American baseball and the U.S. into a stronger relationship.

First Latinos in the Game:

In the 1880s two Latin American players began playing baseball in the U.S. under the auspices that they were “Spanish” rather than Cuban or Mexican: Esteban Bellán and Vincent Nava. Because of the segregation system in place at the time, Bellán and Nava existed within the black and white polar structure as something “other.” In 1902, Colombian Luis Castro became the first Latin American born player in the major leagues since 1886 when he began playing for the Philadelphia A’s. After Castro, more Latinos began showing up in the majors, primarily from Cuba, though the entry of Latinos into the majors depended largely on the color of their skin. The racial segregation of the baseball leagues, which began in the 1880s, defrosted slowly as Native Americans began to participate during the 1890s and more Latinos were welcomed in the 1900s. Prior to the integration of baseball by Jackie Robinson in 1947, Latino players were only welcomed in the majors if their skin was light enough to pass; which left dark-skinned Latino ballplayers with the option of barnstorming around the U.S., playing in the Negro Leagues, or remaining in their home countries to play in leagues there.

REGIONAL PRACTICES & TRADITIONS

From 1900 to 1920 a “Transnational Baseball Circuit” helped spread the game and establish connections between the U.S. and Latin American baseball leagues and players. Much of the draw for professionals to play in the Latin American leagues began with the warmer winter climates and the opportunities for blacks that did not exist in the major leagues in the U.S. In fact, the introduction of Latino players into the game of baseball put decidedly more focus on the question of race over the first part of the twentieth century, as the issue of how to racially classify Latinos surfaced. In short, many white Latinos were welcomed while black Latinos were as equally segregated as the blacks from the U.S.

Cuba:

In many ways, Cuba ranks as the generator of baseball through other parts of the Caribbean, as many emigrants who fled after the 1880s wars for independence spread the game to places like the Dominican Republic. Baseball has been played in Cuba since the 1850s when Cuban students and expatriates would return from the U.S. bringing the game with them. The U.S. also held many commercial interests in Cuban ports at this time and American sailors would exhibit the game as well.

In 1878 the Cuban League began play with three teams and in 1900 became integrated so many black U.S. players were attracted to the league. Until 1947 the league had an arrangement in place with the U.S. major leagues to exist as a developmental league for them until the 1959 Cuban Revolution abolished professional sports.

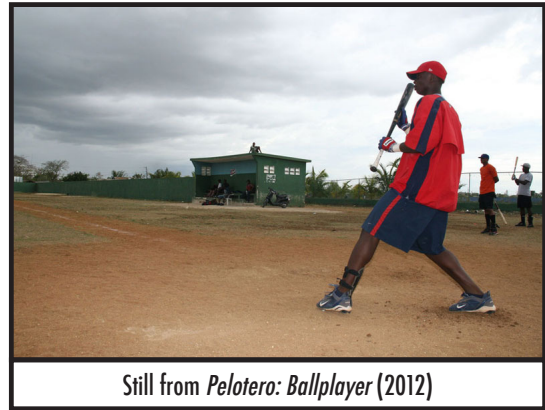
In 1868 Cuban Esteban Bellán became the first Latin American to play professional baseball in the U.S. In 1899 the All Cubans became the first team of Latin Americans to tour the U.S.; they toured again from 1902 to 1905, which helped scouts in the major leagues and in the Negro Leagues come into contact with their players.

Along with Cuba’s professional baseball leagues, there have also existed a number of amateur forms of baseball including the sugar mill games played by workers of sugar mill factories as an outlet from work. These amateur teams were segregated until 1959.

The amateur leagues became the focus of Cuban baseball fans’ passion after all professional sports were banned after the 1960 revolution led by Fidel Castro. After the revolution Castro demanded that the focus of sports be folded into the revolutionary ideology. Amateur baseball would provide a great platform for this because of its focus on team building rather than on money.

Even Castro had been a talented baseball pitcher when he was a student at the University of Havana and attracted major league scouts’ attention. Ultimately he turned down their signing bonus to pursue a degree in law.

With the loss of the professional system players could no longer make any significant money and so the temptation to defect to the U.S. in order to play in the majors exploded, particularly in the 1990s after the Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba lost its valuable trading partner. Cuban baseball defectors are still looked upon with derision back home.



Still from *Pelotero: Ballplayer* (2012)

Dominican Republic:

Cuban immigrants who had left during “The Ten Years War” against Spain in the 1880s brought baseball to the Dominican Republic and the much of the Caribbean. The game had existed in Cuba since the 1850s.

The first professional teams were organized in the 1890s. By the early 1920s teams from the Dominican Republic began traveling abroad to play teams from other Caribbean nations and teams from the U.S. as well.

During this period the president and military strongman of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, began attempts to modernize the society in general. These efforts included the game of baseball; he set about building stadiums and organizing the leagues and players to compete against the best players from the U.S. major leagues and the Negro Leagues.

In 1937 the legendary Satchel Paige played along with several other Negro League stars were offered large sums of money to play for a team owned and operated by Trujillo himself. After returning to the U.S. after their season, the players traveled across the country to play baseball as “Trujillo’s All-Stars.”

In 1956 the first Dominican player, Ozzie Virgil, made his debut in the U.S. major leagues. Other players

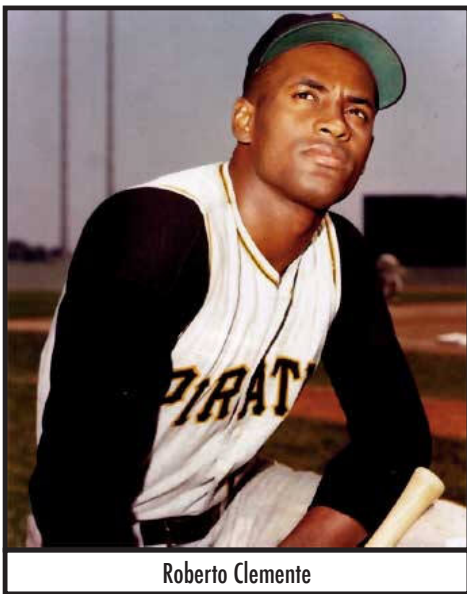
like Juan Marichal, Felipe Alou, and Manny Mota would follow soon after and a virtual pipeline of baseball talent between the Dominican Republic and the U.S. was well established for the future.

The talent in the country has drawn major league scouts ever since, and schools and scouting locations have existed since the 1970s. Currently there are more Dominican players in the U.S. major leagues than from any of the other Latin American countries combined.

Puerto Rico:

In 1938 Puerto Rico began its first semi-professional baseball league with six teams participating. Many players from the U.S. Negro Leagues including Emilio Navarro, Satchel Paige, and Josh Gibson would contribute to the rosters during the initial phase of the leagues. Beginning in the 1940s, some major leaguers began using the league during the winter as a way to continue playing baseball in a warmer climate. During this time African Americans also were drawn to play in Puerto Rico because of a more open attitude to racial integration.

In 1952, a teenager by the name of Roberto Clemente made his debut in the league. Clemente would go on to become perhaps the most historically significant Latino Player of the twentieth century in terms of overall talent, baseball accomplishments, and humanitarian efforts. In 1955 Clemente made his debut with the Pittsburgh Pirates in the U.S. The early years of his time in the U.S. were marked by frustration due to racist beliefs of some teammates and media, including the stereotype that he and other Latino players were “lazy.”



Roberto Clemente

During his 18-year career with the Pirates, Clemente

was a standout. His Pirates team would win two World Series during this stretch in 1960 and 1971, in the latter Clemente was voted Most Valuable Player. He was elected an All Star 15 times, won a league MVP in 1966, and won 12 Gold Glove awards, which were given to the best defensive player at each position. Clemente’s spectacular defense in right field and his legendary throwing arm were trademarks of his game and are still used as comparable descriptions amongst today’s players.

Clemente used his wealth and status to get heavily involved in humanitarian work in Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries. In the aftermath of a major earthquake in Nicaragua in 1972 Clemente organized efforts to contribute food and other supplies to the victims. A plane that he was aboard with materials bound for Nicaragua went down off the coast of Puerto Rico on December 31, 1972 and Clemente was killed. He had accompanied this flight because he had learned that previous supplies had been diverted by corrupt officials in the country.

Clemente achieved a number of “firsts” as a Latino. He was the first Latino elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame (1973), the first Latino to win a World Series as a starter (1960), the first Latino to win a league MVP award (1966), and the first Latino to win World Series MVP award (1971). He was also the first player to have the required five year waiting period waived in order to be posthumously elected to the Hall of Fame in 1973.

In honor of Clemente’s contributions to the game and his place among all Latinos, many Latino players have expressed their respect by choosing to wear his signature number 21. Since 1973, the Roberto Clemente Award has been giving annually to the player in MLB who “best exemplifies the game of baseball, sportsmanship, community involvement and the individual’s contribution to his team.”

Mexico:

The arrival of baseball in Mexico is believed to have happened around the middle of the nineteenth century at about the same time or shortly after the U.S. and Mexico fought a war that ended in 1848. The building of the railroad at this time spread the game as well, especially in the northern parts of the country. Since the first professional league was founded in Mexico in 1925 with six teams, the leagues have had expansions and contractions to arrive at the current level of sixteen teams. For the first fifteen years of the league, Cuban imports made up much of the rosters and most of the games were played in the capital city. After 1940, the league began to look to

the U.S. Negro Leagues for players and tried to draw major league players away from the U.S. as well, though not often successfully. The Mexican League of today exists as a minor league, playing at the AAA level or the level that minor league teams in the U.S. play right below the major league teams. Unlike the AAA teams in the U.S., the teams in Mexico are not tied to any specific major league teams and most players routinely seek opportunities there for a platform of entry to the majors.

In 1978 a seventeen year old named Fernando Valenzuela began playing in the Mexican League and by 1979 had attracted the Los Angeles Dodgers of the U.S. who took a liking to the young pitcher and signed him. After a few seasons in the minor leagues, Valenzuela was ready to start the 1981 season with the major league team. With the combination of eight straight victories to start his career, the large Mexican-American population of Los Angeles, and the young left-hander's personality and quirky, "look-to-the-sky" pitching delivery, "Fernandomania" swept first across southern California and then across all of the U.S. as the rookie pitcher dominated in his first season.

A part of the 1981 MLB season was wiped out due to a player's strike but Valenzuela's performance that year was overpowering and it led him to become the first pitcher ever to win the Rookie of the Year award and the Cy Young award for the best pitcher in his league in the same year. Valenzuela also helped lead the Dodgers in the World Series championship over the New York Yankees that fall.

Latin American-born Cy Young Award* Winners

- Felix Hernandez (2010, Venezuela)
- Johan Santana (2004, 2006, Venezuela)
- Pedro Martinez (1997, 1999, 2000, Dominican Republic)
- Willie Hernandez (1984, Puerto Rico)
- Fernando Valenzuela (1981, Mexico)
- Miguel Cuellar (1969, Cuba)

*given annually to the best pitcher in each of the two major leagues

Though "El Toro" (as Valenzuela was nicknamed) would go on to have several more significant statistical seasons, his enduring legacy stems primarily from his unifying, pride-filling performance at the start of his career. This media-crazed period drew support from Latinos all across the U.S. and cemented the pop-cultural potential of Latino stars in American sports. The Latino population was not the only group to recognize the charisma as even mainstream white America tuned in to the mania.

In 2005 Valenzuela was rightly named as one of the three starting pitchers on Major League Baseball's "Latino Legends Team," along with Pedro Martinez and Juan Marichal.

CONTEMPORARY FORMS

Today, baseball is played in most Latin American countries including the Caribbean island nations and parts of Central and South America. In many of these countries the sport is so dominant that it is second only to soccer in terms of ubiquitous popularity. Prominent professional leagues exist in the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. Many of the Latin American players who play in the major leagues during the summer in the U.S. often spend the winters in professional leagues in the Caribbean. Players who were born in Latin America as well as players of Latin descent born in the U.S. are prominent on the rosters of every team in the United States' Major League Baseball (MLB).

Many major league teams have started academies of baseball development and scouting in different Latin American coun-

Latin American-born Most Valuable Player (MVP) Award* Winners

- Albert Pujos (2005, 2008, 2009, Dominican Republic)
- Vladimir Guerrero (2004, Dominican Republic)
- Miguel Tejada (2002, Dominican Republic)
- Ivan Rodriguez (1999, Puerto Rico)
- Juan Gonzalez (1996, 1998, Puerto Rico)
- Sammy Sosa (1998, Dominican Republic)
- Jose Canseco (1988, Cuba)
- George Bell (1987, Dominican Republic)
- Willie Hernandez (1984, Puerto Rico)
- Rod Carew (1977, Panama)
- Orlando Cepeda (1967, Puerto Rico)
- Roberto Clemente (1966, Puerto Rico)
- Zoilo Versalles (1965, Cuba)

* given annually to the best player in each of the two major leagues

tries, such as the most prominent in San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic, in order to cultivate the young talent at an early age. Teams offer the best of these young players exorbitant signing bonuses that allow them to leave their homes and travel to the U.S. to join the minor league teams and try to make the roster (and the potential high salary rewards) of the major league team. Many times these players come to the U.S. with marginal English speaking skills and very little geographic knowledge of the country, which can lead to them feeling alienated from their teammates and coaches. As a result, teams often teach their coaches to communicate in Spanish as well as develop the English speaking skills of their Latino imports, though most terms and phrases are simply related to baseball and on the field concerns. This acknowledgement by the major leagues speaks to the recognition that Latin American talent and influence among the players and the game itself are on the rise and an adaptive, inclusive approach to this direction is most desirable for the betterment of the game itself.

The percentage of Major League Baseball (MLB) players on opening day rosters at the beginning of the 2010 season who were born in Latin American countries was 28.3 percent, up from 13 percent at the same point in 1990. The majority of these players come from three different countries: the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. Players like Albert Pujols (Dominican Republic), Mariano Rivera (Panama), David Ortiz (Dominican Republic), Carlos Beltran (Puerto Rico), and Johan Santana (Venezuela) not only contribute to game today, but they are star players demanding high dollar contracts, high endorsement deals, and contend for league-wide awards year after year.

In 2006 the first “World Baseball Classic” championship tournament was held and dominated by the pres-

ence of Latin American teams. Games were played in the United States, in Puerto Rico, and in Japan. Teams were fielded from the United States, Puerto Rico, Panama, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, and eventual champion Japan. Though Japan brought home the gold, the presence of so many Latin American teams and players in the tournament accurately depicts the sport’s cultural stranglehold on Latin America as more than just a regional pastime, but as a passionate element of its ongoing cultural identity.

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