

The Emergence of the Latin American in Major League Baseball, 1950-1968

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Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, American baseball fans witnessed a greater infusion of Latino ball players into the major leagues than ever before. Athletes from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and other Caribbean and South American countries gave America's national pastime an international "flavor." Familiar names such as Mickey Mantle, Ted Williams, and Willie Mays now appeared in the box scores alongside Minnie Minoso, Roberto Clemente, Orlando Cepeda and other Latins.

Latin Americans brought with them talent and a strong desire to succeed. Yet, as "outsiders," Latinos – unlike white American ball players – had much to overcome. For Latins, playing baseball in the United States involved more than just swinging a bat and throwing a ball -it meant adjusting to American culture. The ability to play came easily; the adjustment in everyday life was much harder.

Problems such as loneliness and changes in eating habits were among the many obstacles Latins had to face. Moreover, many Latins could not fully comprehend

American racial attitudes. Language was a particularly severe problem. It formed a barrier which led to misinterpretations with the press -contributed to their lack of recognition -and hindered their assimilation into American baseball. The Latino path into the big leagues was not an easy one and –for many Latinos – might not have existed if blacks had not earlier broken baseball’s color barrier.

Jackie Robinson’s groundbreaking in 1947 not only created an entrance for blacks to enter the big leagues, but also proved instrumental to Latinos as well. Before 1949 only thirty-eight players in the major leagues had come from Latin countries -all of them light skinned. However, after 1949 black Latinos made up a large portion of Latinos entering the big leagues. Such stars as Minnie Minoso and Roberto Clemente were among them.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Latinos firmly established themselves as formidable big league stars. Their achievements were noteworthy. Bobby Avila, Roberto Clemente, Tony Oliva, and Matty Alou all captured batting titles. Minnie Minoso and Orlando Cepeda were awarded rookie of the year honors. Juan Marichal won twenty or more games on six different occasions while Clemente, Cepeda, and Zoilo Versalles all were recipients of most valuable player awards in their respective leagues during the 1960s.

In spite of these achievements, Latinos continued to endure racial prejudice and acculturation as they played in the United States. Equality and recognition had not been totally achieved for the Latin American ball players, but by 1968 their paths into the big leagues had opened significantly. Since 1958, Latin opportunities had grown tremendously through the accomplishments of players like Clemente, Cepeda, Marichal and others. Assimilation for the young Latino ball player, though still not easy, was less different by the late sixties as clubs began to accommodate incoming Latinos with Spanish-speaking coaches and other employees. Racial discrimination did not disappear during the late 1960s but neither did the memories of veteran Latino ball players who had faced discrimination during the climb into the big leagues. Their experience and advice to their brethren brought added confidence to the new Latinos entering American society for the first time. By the 1970s the trail of the Latino ball player, marked years earlier by Minnie Minoso and Roberto Clemente, and widened further by players of the early 1960s provided an easier road for the Latin stars of the future.



Dave Wiggins Sam Regalado Alan Metcalfe Earle Zeigler