

# Latinos Within Baseball's Purgatory The Latin Experience in the Minor Leagues, 1950-1968

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Delusions of grandeur have often obsessed many young ball players who hoped to make the "big time" - young Latinos during the 1950s and 1960s were no different. Dreams of big money contracts, first class travel and throngs of cheering crowds seemed more of a reality during those decades than in the past when the "color line" prevented black players from competing in the American big leagues. The few Latinos in the major leagues during the 1950s performed well. This gave big league scouts the incentive to search for more talent south of the border. In the meantime, many young Latinos, realizing that in their homelands financial success was limited, looked northward where potential wealth and

fame presumably existed for those determined enough to endure the initiations. However, what lay between mediocrity and utopia was “purgatory” - the minor leagues.

Purgatory was the “way station” between utopia and oblivion - the limbo between success and failure, and the point between the beginning or the end. Professional baseball’s purgatory was its minor leagues. For the Latinos, the minors existed as a place where one paid his dues in hope of success, just as penance are offered in return for grace. The penance at this level came in the form of second hand uniforms, endless traveling hours in broken down buses or old station wagons, makeshift locker rooms in cold or sweltering temperatures, and frequent encounters with Jim Crow. And purgatory was far away from home in such places as Kokomo, Indiana, Springfield, Massachusetts, or El Paso, Texas. Purgatory did not offer lessons in English and the menus most often only included hamburgers and french fries. Purgatory existed on the road to the big leagues.

Yet, for many Latinos these hardships offered a beginning in their quest for upward social mobility. The game itself did not cast a barrier between rich and poor, big or small, or even white, black or brown. Only those who governed it cast these barriers - and that was quickly changing during the 1950s. In their eyes, talent was the key to success. Baseball contained what sociologist David Q. Voigt described as the “dominating value of (American) social history - individualism.” Latinos believed that if they performed well in this democratic game, grandeur could be reached.

Many Latinos looked forward because their pasts did not leave much upon which to reflect. Wretched domestic conditions and economic limitations provided the incentives to better themselves elsewhere. Adjusting to the minor leagues was not an easy task for Latinos. The process of acculturation actually started at this level of baseball for the Latin players. Later stars like Felipe Alou, Orlando Cepeda, Juan Marichal and Luis Tiant paid their dues in purgatory. Here they ate hamburgers and, for some, struggled with the English language. Spanish-speaking managers like George Genovese and Buddy Kerr, who understood and appreciated the Latinos, helped to ease some of the problems these players endured during their early years in American professional baseball. Some Latinos made it to the top of the professional ranks quickly. Others did not. Still, others achieved stardom only within the minor leagues such as Luis Marquez and Ramon Conde.

At times, purgatory served as a useful tool for Latinos striving toward professionalism and acculturation. At other times, it served only as an arena of frustration. Those that did make it out of limbo encountered similar, sometimes larger problems as they tried to assimilate into the big leagues and adjust to American society. Still, whatever problems big league Latin players faced could at least be soothed with a major league check. There was no such satisfaction in the minor leagues. Only hope and desire could overshadow second hand uniforms, rickety stadiums and humble paychecks. For some, the realization of their dreams lay only innings away. For many others, their drive toward the utopia of big league baseball stopped short in purgatory - the minor leagues.