

Baseball In The Barrios

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Mexican-American teams were in abundance in the American southwest from the 1940s to the 1960s particularly in East Los Angeles, a section known as the “barrios.” Clubs like the Carmelita Provision “Chorizeros,” the Los Angeles Forty-Sixty team, and El Paso Shoe Store (called so even though they played in Los Angeles), among many others, featured such local standouts as Alberto Pena, Frank Ocampo and Greg Regalado. Not household names nationally, but certainly popular players on the sandlots of East Los Angeles. Mexican-American baseball in the East Los Angeles barrios consumed the passions of so many young Hispanics that at one point the Carmelita club carried nine members on its team from the same immediate family. An array of semi-professional and municipal city teams saturated the barrio sectors of Los Angeles and, while potential major league talent was sparse, the competition remained fierce.

In spite of the large numbers of Mexican-American baseball organizations and teams throughout the southwest, major league interest in these players waned. Getting the attention of big league scouts proved difficult. Though scouting efforts for Latinos did increase throughout Latin America by the late 1950s, it still remained minimal in many of the Mexican-American areas within southwestern towns. Thus, even though players like Ernie Sierra, Richard Pena, “Babe” Omeles and “Chilo” Herrera performed admirably in the lesser known barrio leagues, only the local Mexican-American baseball followers knew and appreciated them.

Still, baseball in the Mexican quarter of Los Angeles provided for a weekly gathering of many Mexican-American families, especially during the 1940s and early 1950s when television had yet to make its mark; during a time when many newly arrived Mexicans firmly clung to the cultural ties that assured them security in a new country; and during a time when only minor league baseball existed in Los Angeles. Sundays were times when a Chicano could escape the “gringo” world he faced during monotonous work weeks and baseball played at the local playgrounds provided the catalyst to this “escape”. Up to a thousand people would attend these games periodically. Even the local parish priest might be seen blessing the players and field on special occasions.

Baseball in the barrios not only helped to preserve a Mexican heritage within these communities, but more importantly, provided a sense of unity amongst the people. In other words, baseball in the barrios was a community affair. While baseball and other American sports were often used as a method of upward social mobility for many ethnics, in East Los Angeles, as well as other barrios in the southwest, baseball was of equal value as a method to socialize and maintain their Mexican cultural identity. The strength and security for many Mexican-Americans lay within their community and the local baseball games were very much a part of the nucleus that held it intact.



Helen and Bruce Bennett extolling the virtues of Ohio State University to Linda Williams.