

# The Post World War II Mexican League: Precursor to Integration of the Major Leagues

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As World War II was drawing to a close, many major league baseball players succumbed, for a variety of reasons, to the temptation to “jump” to the Mexican League operated by the Pasquel brothers. Considered by many to be a stained page in the history of baseball, and generally ignored by sports historians, the Mexican League of this era was, in actuality, a colorful chapter that enriched professional baseball in many ways.

If Branch Rickey opened the door that admitted blacks to the major leagues, the circumstances attendant to playing in the post World War II Mexican League unlocked that door. “Wartime ballplayers” saw, in the return of the “true” major leaguers from military service, their tickets back to the minors. Returning to the poor facilities, bad travel packages, and low salaries of the minors did not appeal to many players who had tasted “big league stuff” during the war. These players were more than eager to accept the opportunity to enjoy some of the big money the Pasquels were offering to any player willing to leave his present club and play in La Liga Mexicana. The money and opportunity certainly seemed better to these players than returning to the “bushes.”

But there were some unseen strings attached to the Pasquel peso. Many of the players already active in the Mexican League were black American ballplayers who had established reputations in the “Negro” major leagues in the United States. Many had played for years in Cuba and Mexico. These black players were accepted and admired by the Mexican fans. One of the strings, though unspoken, was that the white American ballplayers who “jumped” had to play on teams that had black American ballplayers and, in some cases, black Latin American or Cuban managers. In essence, the situation for the white Americans was: if you want the money, then you must accept the playing conditions and you must play with blacks and, maybe, for a black. This was a new experience for white American professional baseball players. White professionals had, for years, played against “Negro” barnstormers, all-star teams, and organized pro teams but not on a regular basis. Most such games had been, to the white ballplayers and the white media, “exhibition” games. But white Americans had never played with blacks on the same team in quest of a championship and bonus money.

The intent of this paper is to use the personal experiences of the author and assorted memorabilia along with research into the literature of the times to present: (1) an overview of the Mexican League; (2) who the players were, what happened to them as a result of their Mexican League experience, and “where are they now;” (3) the quality of baseball played; (4) the often unique playing conditions; (5) unusual connections between the Mexican League and modern big league baseball, and (6) the adjustments of both blacks and whites to being on the same teams and working toward the same goals.

The paper will also discuss the position assumed by organized ball in the United States, expressed through the commissioner's office, toward those players who had breached their contracts and the players' reactions to that position. A discussion of the Danny Gardella case as a forerunner of baseball's current attitude toward "Due Process" procedures will be included. There will also be a brief examination of the connection which exists between the legal issues raised by "banned" players and the eventual destruction of the reserve clause.

Contrary to popular beliefs of the time, the post World War II Mexican League did not harm baseball. It helped baseball grow. It increased interest in baseball after a long, tragic war; helped destroy white players' stereotypes about black and Latin American baseball players; gave future major leaguers a chance to grow; hurt a few careers; taught baseball a lesson about Due Process law, and tapped a new source of baseball talent and paved the way for that talent to make its way to the majors and be accepted there.