

Fernando Valenzuela and the Rise of Hispanicism

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On April 9, 1981, Fernando Valenzuela took the mound to open the season for the Los Angeles Dodgers. While his start was unscheduled, the rookie from Mexico responded by tossing a 2-0 five hit shutout over the defending Western Division champion Houston Astros. The first of eight consecutive victories, a period of jubilation known as “Fernandomania” had commenced. Three major factors preceeded the Fernando Valenzuela phenomenon: the major increase of the Hispanic population during previous decades, the emergence of the Spanish-language mass media, and Dodgers broadcaster Jaime Jarrin's development as a leading figure in Spanish-language sportscasting.

Each pattern emerged during ‘Fernandomania.’ The Latin population, predominantly Mexican and Mexican American, turned out in force not only to exhibit support for the young pitcher, but as a means to exhibit cultural pride. Things were such that all Dodger games in which Valenzuela pitched were carried by forty-eight affiliates throughout Latin America. As well, Spanish-speaking newscasters working in the English-speaking media were utilized to get the inside “scoops” on Valenzuela, and many did so with great pride. Furthermore, Valenzuela’s popularity was not just localized nor simply in Latin America. Around the United States, the young Mexican pitcher drew enormous crowds. The *Sporting News*, in fact, reported that during the 1981 season each National League park drew an additional 9,000 more patrons when Valenzuela pitched.

Fernando Valenzuela, of course, was a quality pitcher. During the strike-shortened season, in which he also defeated the New York Yankees in a critical third game of the World Series, he led the National League in wins, shutouts, innings pitched, and strikeouts. These achievements earned him both the Rookie-of-the-Year and Cy Young awards (the only players ever to accomplish this feat).

Indeed, before the end of the 1981 season there already existed a biography on Valenzuela. “Fernandomania” even penetrated international politics. In June he received an invitation to dine with both President Ronald Reagan and Mexico’s President Jose Lopez de Portillo. When Valenzuela arrived, over fifty journalists and photographers were there to greet him when normally only twelve covered such events.

“Fernandomania” helped to bridge cultural gaps between the United States and Mexico, and with the American Hispanic community at-large. This phenomenon not only testified to America’s craving for self-made heroes, but, more importantly, to the emergence and influence of the Hispanic world within the United States.