

“Image is Everything:” Latin Baseball Players and the American Media

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Since 1912, when Cuban Armando Marsans first blasted reporters who criticized his play, to 1992, when Puerto Rican Ruben Sierra viewed to American League Play-offs as a mission to gain long overdue notoriety, the relationship between Latin players and the American media has often been tenuous and explosive. Frustrated by what many Latinos terms as a “lack of recognition” for their outstanding play, Spanish-speaking ballplayers viewed American journalists with apprehension. The divisions grew, in part, due to a number of factors: columns which enhanced negative Latin stereotypes; interviews printed phonetically which made the player’s broken English appear comical and reporters who avoided interview with Latin players due to their inability to communicate in Spanish. The Latin entourage, of course, made vast contributions to America’s national pastime, particularly since the 1950s. Felipe Alou, Roberto Alomar, Roberto Clemente, Orlando Cepeda, Juan Marichal, Tony Perez and others won several awards. Moreover, many were instrumental in leading their respective clubs to banner seasons. Yet, few Latinos received the notoriety enjoyed by their American peers. Often only those who complained the loudest caught the attention of the press corps. Journalists themselves, however, also had to adapt. Their inability to speak Spanish caused them to lose vital interviews and poignant stories. Their ignorance of Latin culture also enhanced their problems. Not until the emergence of Fernando Valenzuela in 1981 did the American media pay special attention to all aspects of a Latin athlete. The notoriety Valenzuela received did not bridge all the gaps between Latinos and journalists, but it did temper an uncomfortable relationship that took years to develop. Indeed, the bittersweet and sometimes volatile exchanges between the Latin player and the American media in many ways typify the misunderstanding long held by North Americans towards their Latin neighbours. Needless to say, the Latino experience with the American press added to the trauma of acculturation and tested the dignity of the player.

This paper includes various primary and secondary sources that outline my thesis. In addition to the various newspaper, magazine, and other media accounts, interviews with such players as Felipe Alou, Orlando Cepeda, Tony Perez, and others, supplement the accounts of journalists like columnists Rob Hunter of the Los Angeles *Daily News*, reporter Chuck Stewart of the Spokane *Chronicle*, writer Nick

Peters of the Sacramento *Bee*, Los Angeles Dodgers Spanish-language broadcaster Jaime Jarrin, and writer Rudy Garcia of the Spanish-language newspaper, *La Opinion* (Los Angeles).