

The King and his Court Early Baseball and other Sports in Nicaragua

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Unlike most of Latin America, *el Rey de los Deportes* [the King of Sports] in Nicaragua is baseball. Baseball was introduced on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast in 1889 and first played in Managua and Granada, two important cities of the much more densely populated Pacific highlands area in 1891. Interest in baseball grew rapidly, and it became the most widely played sport in Nicaragua during the early 20th century. The dominance of baseball over soccer may be related to Nicaragua's hot and humid climate, which is more suited to the playing of baseball.

Baseball dominated the sport scene through most of the 'teens, but in the early 1920s its popularity waned and was partly replaced by soccer, boxing, and basketball. Soccer was played exclusively by socially elite men and schoolboys, especially in Managua, Granada, Diriamba, and Leon. Boxing became very popular in the 1920s, and matches in Managua, held in theatres and in the baseball stadium, drew large and enthusiastic crowds. Most of the participants in boxing probably were lower on the social scale than those in other sports. Early basketball was played mainly by women. In 1923 women's basketball teams were organized in several cities, all of the teams being described as composed of "senoritas of the finest levels of society."

Although sport activity probably existed in many of the principal towns, most of the publicized competition took place among teams of Managua, Granada, Masaya, and, to lesser extent, Leon and Chinandega, which were the largest cities, all connected by daily passenger railway service. Teams from Managua, Granada, and Masaya, could easily travel by train between any of these three cities for a Sunday game and return home the same day.

As a result of civil warfare in a country considered critical to US interests, United States intervention began in Nicaragua in 1909. For much of the period between 1912 and 1933, Americans ran the railways, collected the customs fees, and maintained military forces in Nicaragua. Marines stationed in Managua fielded baseball teams and supplied officials for baseball and other sport competitions between Nicaraguan teams. Visiting crews from US and British warships also competed against Nicaraguan teams. Although the US presence in the country was not welcomed by most Nicaraguans, the foreign athletes seemed to be accepted on a friendly basis. The Marine baseball players - along with a few prominent American business and social figures who had resided in the country many years and promoted sport activities - were probably the best ambassadors for the US during the years of intervention.

In addition to playing and watching "modern" sports, recreation in early 20th century Nicaragua included private parties, public concerts, movies, and the annual patron saint festivals of towns and neighbourhoods. The local festivals provided the popular sporting pastimes of the common people and were the high points of the year for many Nicaraguans. These festivals lasted one to a few days each, and in addition to religious ceremonies, featured heavy drinking, gambling, and a variety of recreational activities including horse races, cockfights, and bullfights.

Participants in the recently imported sports of baseball, soccer, boxing, and basketball came mainly from the middle and upper classes of the larger cities. In most cases, it was Nicaraguans who introduced and fostered the imported sports, although a few foreigners were strong supporters of sport activities and made important contributions to their development. Unlike the situation in Guatemala during the same period, sport in Nicaragua was not part of celebrations of Independence Day, *el Dia de la Raza*, or presidents' birthdays.