

Richard V. McGehee
Southeastern Louisiana University

Más que béis y box: Hispanic-Americans in United States Sport History

While black and women athletes now receive considerable attention from the general public and sport historians in the United States, Asian-American, Native American and Hispanic-American athletes of both sexes are still largely “invisible” to most of their country men. This paper approaches the history of Hispanic-Americans in sport at the rudimentary level of describing the achievements of several outstanding athletes from this ethnic group. The purpose of the paper is to bring attention to the fact that Hispanic-Americans have indeed contributed to sport at the collegiate, national, and international (Olympic) levels in the US. Information on the lives and sporting achievements of Hispanic-American athletes was obtained through personal correspondence, interviews, and secondary sources.

The societal category of Hispanic-Americans includes individuals with a great variety of national origins, cultural backgrounds, and class and racial characteristics. The opportunities and experiences of these individuals in sport and the extent to which they may have exhibited behaviors and encountered discriminatory treatment related to their ethnic and cultural identities may therefore be extremely diverse. For the purposes of this paper, “Hispanic-American” refers to citizens of the US or long-term residents whose ethnic origins are Latin American or Spanish. Also, Latin America is being restricted to

countries of Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking people and thus excludes countries within Central America, South America or the Caribbean whose official language is English, French. or Dutch.

Included in this ethnic classification are persons with a great variety of backgrounds, experiences, and motives for living in the US. Some have a long tradition of residence in the geographical area of the US, even prior to establishment of the nation (in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California). Others are long-term residents or citizens of the first generation, or relatively recent immigrants. Some of these intend to stay while others plan to return to their home countries after earning sufficient money. Some individuals in this category are political refugees from countries such as Nicaragua, Cuba, and Guatemala. There are also illegal immigrants, students (these include scholarship athletes) and professional athletes. Most Latino professional baseball players reside in the US only during training and competitive seasons and thus do not fit the definition proposed here for “Hispanic-American.”

Some Hispanics in the US have inter-married with non-Hispanics to the extent that their ethnicity might not be obvious in the form of surname or appearance, and for these individuals ethnicity becomes a matter of personal choice. In some areas, such as South Louisiana, long-term residents with distant Hispanic roots no longer identify in any way with these origins. However, elsewhere, many Hispanics are readily identifiable as a distinct sub-group of their communities because of their appearance, language use, religion, social customs, and other cultural elements. Some of these individuals have experienced ethnic and racial discrimination in a variety of forms and situations and for some, their opportunities and experiences in sport have been affected by societal attitudes towards them.

Many Hispanic-Americans have contributed to Olympic efforts in the US since 1924 when Joe Salas won a silver medal in boxing in Paris. The first Hispanic-American woman to represent the US was figure skater Catherine Machado in the 1956 Winter Games. Many others participated in US Olympic squads in 1932 and later years, on collegiate and national teams, and in professional sport.