

SPORT AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO EXPERIENCE

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“The Usual Suspects”: Danny Almonte and the Politics of Latino Inclusion in America’s Game

In August 2001 the Little League World Series drew the largest US television audience in Series’ history. Among the attractions stood the Rolando Paulino All Stars, a team hailed the “Baby Bronx Bombers” for their exploits. Composed of Latinos of Dominican and Puerto Rican backgrounds and led by the Dominican-born left-handed pitcher Danny Almonte, the Bronx team battled within a game of qualifying for the Championship game. Accused of possibly using ineligible (overage) players, controversy followed the team.

Suspicious focused primarily on Almonte. Questions about his age resulted in a maelstrom wherein all individuals affiliated with the team became suspect. At several post-Series press conferences parents of the team’s players fielded suspicions and accusations from the press: Were they legal? Were their papers falsified? In Almonte’s case, a public inquisition eventually produced falsified documents: the “real” birth certificate proved he was two years older than initially claimed. Unfortunately, for many Latinos, the controversy showcased the all too real experience of being subject to everyday forms of surveillance and public policing about their presence in U.S. society.

Drawing on issues raised by the Almonte controversy, this paper examines some of the broader concerns regarding the participation of Latinos in America’s game, particularly as it illuminates the intersection of discourses about race, nation, and athletic achievement. Indeed, the history of baseball as a transnational cultural practice elucidates certain characteristics of U.S. relations with the Spanish-speaking Americas. At the end of the nineteenth century Americans sporting goods entrepreneur A.G. Spalding embraced the spirit of the empire and advocated that “baseball follow the flag” – this despite the game having already reached Cuba, Puerto Rico, and parts of the Dominican Republic and Mexico. As a result of the inter-cultural exchanges that

transpired, twentieth century baseball has provided a common cultural practice for many Latinos and North Americans. The game has served as an institution for “Americanizing” new populations in the U.S. as well as an arena for Latinos to strive for social acceptance. These, however, are not uncomplicated processes. During professional baseball’s Jim Crow era, the incorporation of individuals from the Spanish-speaking Americas raised questions about their eligibility for inclusion (and to what degree). As demonstrated in the Almonte case, baseball still represents an institution where the meaning of social inclusion, citizenship, and national belonging all come into play. Moreover, beyond the playing field, the ways these issues were contested in the Almonte controversy sheds light on the problematic process of everyday surveillance of the “other” – a social form of policing where the punishment for being suspect (not belonging) within the national imaginary is banishment to the periphery of American society.

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**The Mexicanos Show Them: The 1961 Donna
Redskins and Their Drive to the Texas State
Football Championship**

During the past three decades the breadth of Mexican American history has expanded dramatically as researchers explored the development of various communities throughout the United States as well as spotlighting class, religious, and political diversity within this group. While much has been learned, there are still facets of barrio life that remain relatively unexplored; athletic endeavor is one such area. An increased Mexican American/Latino presence in a variety of professional and amateur athletic activities attests to the growing significance of this minority group at all levels of the American sporting scene. Yet, the history of team sports in the United States is still framed, almost exclusively, in terms of black/white interactions. In the case of states with large Mexican American/Latino populations, such as Texas, this omission leaves a gap in our historical understanding of sport and its impact on social relations. This lacuna calls for the examination of Mexican American athletic success, and how it has contributed to breaking down stereotypes