

Samuel O Regalado, *Viva Baseball! Latin Major Leaguers and Their Special Hunger*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1998. Illus. pp. 224.

If Latin players today fill significant slots on the major and minor league rosters of all teams in North American professional baseball, such was not always the case. Although Latins had played in the modern major leagues at least since the Cincinnati Reds signed two Cubans in 1911, by 1949, two years after Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier that has excluded known blacks from organised white baseball since the 1880s, only three Latins wore major league uniforms; as of 1950 only 54 Latins total (43 from Cuba) had enjoyed the experience. By contrast, in 1977 alone, 87 Latins spent time in the big leagues, while in 1997, 201 made the jump. Between 1957 and 1997, the number of Cubans in the majors dropped from 15 (52 per cent of all Latins) to five (2.5 per cent), while the number of Dominicans increased from one to 89 (44 per cent), Venezuelans from three to 39; Puerto Ricans in 1997 totaled 42 (21 per cent).

Such change did not come easily. Latins (I prefer Latinos, but here stick to the author's usage), by definition, were of different origins, and, given the persistence of the so-called 'Black Legend' in Anglo-American societies that had since the time of the English Reformation denigrated persons of Spanish and Catholic descent, they were not readily accepted by large numbers of Anglos and Protestants. In addition, many Latins were dark complected, whether of partial African or native American

ancestry, making it even more difficult for them to earn white approval. (In Regalado's mind none of the factors affecting Latinos' acculturation in the United States was more 'traumatic' than the American Jim Crow system of racial segregation). Thirdly, they usually spoke only Spanish, so had trouble fitting in, both on and off the field, with people who had no skills in foreign languages and little patience with foreigners who could not communicate in English. Further, they were away from their families and home environments, therefore felt alone and isolated; consequently, when other Latinos appeared they often grouped together for both ease of language and shared cultural understanding. Finally, as a function of these factors, the American press for a long time was hyper-critical of Latinos, frequently ridiculing their accents, deforming their names (the debate over Jesús Alou's name would be funny if it weren't so typically insensitive), condemning their alleged cliquishness, and questioning both their athletic abilities and their willingness to work hard at their chosen sport.

Time and again Regalado documents how these factors complicated the lives of aspiring Latin ball players. Throughout, he sympathetically recounts how these players stubbornly persisted in their drive to succeed. The force behind them, the 'hunger', derived from two sources: whatever their richness of character, most of Regalado's heroes, great and small, are from economically poor families, in poor communities, in relatively poor countries. Baseball was (is) often a unique way of escape for players and their families from material opportunity. But these Latinos also really loved baseball and often suffered the loneliness and racism for the sheer joy of playing; the prospect of monetary rewards was a welcome bonus. And until baseball's reserve clause was suppressed, free agency moved in and larger television contracts filled baseball's coffers, Latinos were consistently underpaid. So by the late 1970s, Latinos were succeeding on the field, and, in the process, concludes Regalado — based more on speculation and perhaps personal experience than documentation — the Latin baseball players became heroes and symbolic leaders for the larger Latin community in the United States that was struggling for respect as well as political and economic advancement.

A few Latinos were so disturbed by their contacts with United States racism that, like Cuban Lius Tiant Sr, who had played in the Negro leagues, they advised their countrymen to avoid American baseball entirely. Others, like Puerto Rican Roberto Clemente, played on the

mainland yet challenged the press, denounced racism, expressed cultural pride, boasted of his athletic skills and made no apologies for his differences. And he openly criticised those who called him a hypochondriac and malingerer as he put up Hall-of-Fame numbers over an eighteen year career with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

There are several notable omissions in Regalado's otherwise moving account. First, in lamenting the disproportionately low number of Mexicans in North American baseball, he fails to discuss Mexican labour law and a baseball contract system that make it much more difficult and expensive for foreign teams to sign Mexican players. He notes that the Dodgers had to work a 'complicated deal' to acquire the rights to Fernando Valenzuela, but he never details what caused the complications. Second, Regalado never explains the United States visa system that limits the number of foreign Latins who can be brought to the United States to work, at least on the minor league level. For the 1998 season there are a total of 865 such visas shared among the 30 major league organisations, with no group holding more than 30. This creates a bottleneck and may dictate personnel decisions on bases other than strict athletic ability. (One can only speculate about the impact on this system should the Cuban market open up and new pool of talent begin to compete for these limited permits.) Third, he neither compares the 'hunger' of Latins in baseball with the hunger of Latins in other sports, nor that Latin hunger with the hunger of marginalised groups seeking to use sports as an avenue for change. And he barely touches on the distinction between Latins from outside the 50 states and United States Latins, an important issue now that a new generation of native-born Cuban Americans has moved onto the scene.

The bibliography is likewise disappointing. Most striking is the total lack of reference to the extensive writings of Milton Jamail, probably the American academic who knows the most about recent professional baseball in Latin America and of Latins in North American professional ball. Other writers on Latin baseball are either ignored or cited for only a part of their labours. Alan Klein's book on the Dominican Republic is cited, but none of his more recent articles or book analysing baseball along the Texas-Mexican border. Some of Peter Bjarkman's material is listed, but far from all. And there is no mention of John Krich's *El Béisbol* (1989), which may be excused because it is such a bad book. Nor is there mention of several books on Clemente published around 1992 on the

twentieth anniversary of the star's death, works that seek to compensate in part for the bad press Clemente received while alive. In fact, there is surprisingly little from the decade of the 1990s at all in the bibliography. Also, there is virtually no literature in Spanish, although numerous volumes have been published in various Latin countries about their own baseball history and the careers of their nationals who have made it to the big leagues.

All of this highlights the complexity of these topics and the extent of the work, however, uneven, that has been done and that remains to be done. While from the United States perspective this may appear to be a single process — the partial Latinisation of baseball by migrants from the circum-Caribbean area — from the other side it is multidimensional. Those countries that export baseball players to North America are individually distinct: Puerto Rico is a United States territory, designated a commonwealth, its population United States citizens; Cuba before 1959 was closely linked to the US, yet since 1961 has been legally cut off from the world's baseball capital; Mexico has different contract laws; Venezuela is economically more developed and culturally more sophisticated than (say) the Dominican Republic; Columbia has a limited baseball infrastructure, even on its north coast; Panama has had a conspicuous US presence; Columbia and Mexico care more about soccer than baseball; most circum-Caribbean players are blacks or mulattos, though Mexicans and Nicaraguans are more likely to be mestizos.

Regalado has written enthusiastically, even passionately, about a subject close to him and his family. The result is a story at times depressing, at times uplifting. White America's mistreatment of Latin players is a sad commentary on the racist and provincial attitudes so long prevalent inside the alleged leader of the Free World. At the same time, the persistent dedication and ultimate triumph of so many Latins in the face of such obstacles is inspiring. Yet, as Jules Tygiel noted in the case of African-Americans, the admirable acceptance of Latins on the diamond has not led to a proportional increase of Latins in managerial jobs or in the administrative front office of either teams or the various major and minor leagues.

Regalado has blessed us with a readable account of an exciting process in American history. His book has limitations, but it brings together an incredible amount of detail and of humanity; the personality sketches and brief personal histories, many based on interviews, are especially revealing. It joins works by Bjarkman, Klein,

Michael and Mary Oleksak, Rob Ruck and others, as valuable introductions to our understanding of Latin baseballers in North America. We await Jamail's projected volume to take us that much farther.

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