

**El Rey de Los Deportes:
Bodies, Business, and Identity in Mexican Baseball**

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In Mexico, baseball has usually occupied a runner-up slot in terms of overall popularity. Soccer, or *fútbol*, generates the greatest interest. Men, women, and children in most parts of the country identify with a particular team in one of the national leagues, and business generally grinds to a halt when the Mexican men's squad takes part in important global soccer matches like those of the World Cup. In the Mexican northwest, however, baseball has "planted its seed," and enjoys dominance over soccer when it comes to professional organization.¹ While soccer is still popular in the northwest, it is baseball – *el rey de los deportes* or the "king of sports" – that has blossomed into the more significant source of regional pride and economic importance. The *Liga Mexicana del Pacífico* (LMP), operating in eight cities in the states of Baja California North, Sonora, and Sinaloa, sends the team that represents the nation state at the annual *Serie del Caribe*, the most important event on the Latin American baseball calendar. The unique popularity of baseball in the northwest reflects the distinctions between the northwest and the rest of the country, in large part due to the region's proximity to the United States.

What the *Liga del Pacífico* provides is a very public display of the sorts of struggles underway for a variety of individual and group identities in northwestern Mexico. As a professionally organized sport, baseball is a window into society, one which illuminates the links between race, gender, politics, government, and business in

the generation of self and group identities in a region struggling to compete in an increasingly interconnected world. The trend toward widespread commercialization of the game, along with corporate ownership of some teams, manifests the workings of globalization. Teams may represent local communities, but players include Americans, and the league relies on foreign companies for advertising and television revenues. Despite the involvement of so many outside influences on the game itself, the LMP still provides a place for distinctly local and regional identities to be created, expressed, and contested.

For my purpose, identity signifies any one or series of characteristics by which humans refer to themselves based upon “internal reasons and motives” as well as “external causes” including time, space, and prevailing historical narratives. This definition also refers to the processes in which this self-defining process allows humans to differentiate themselves from others, and to have others recognize that differentiation.²

It is difficult enough to make sense of the constantly evolving and often contradictory sets of ideas that constitute individual and group identities. But in a border region such as northwestern Mexico, where individuals and families often live within two worlds – one on either side of the international border – the task seems particularly complicated. There is, after all, no one way of being Mexican or American, Sonoran or Sinloan, male or female. These are all socially constructed terms: labels to attach to the ways of thinking about oneself, and about groups with whom one wishes to, and wishes not to, associate. All identities are dynamic and subject to change.

What is now the northwestern border region in Mexico was isolated from the country’s more powerful central region until the construction of rail lines in the 1880s.³

This coincided with the international promotion of baseball as a hallmark of American culture by U.S. businessmen, journalists, and politicians.⁴ Even with the railroads, places like Culiacán and Hermosillo remained remote outposts.⁵ Tijuana had less than one thousand residents at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁶ American investors led many of the most important business ventures in states like Sonora. The United States and its entrepreneurs had substantial clout when it came to the economic development of the Mexican northwest in the six decades between the U.S.-Mexico War and World War I. This economic power opened the door for American cultural influence in northern Mexico. Baseball is perhaps among the most visible forms of the American presence in the region. But the ways in which the game is played, staged, promoted, and discussed in northwestern Mexico illustrates how Mexicans have appropriated baseball for their own cultural needs and wishes. Baseball, like other forms of popular culture, is “contested terrain.”⁷

The competition between soccer and baseball for attention and economic support from Mexicans points to a different sort of cultural struggle in the country. The choice of sport indicates how Mexicans are culturally tied to different nations. Baseball, like the rap music played at baseball stadiums of the *Liga del Pacífico* and the *hamburguesas* and hot dogs sold by vendors, is culturally linked to the United States. The world of soccer is anchored in Europe, specifically England, and for Mexicans, also in Spain. Mexicans still speak enthusiastically about Hugo Sánchez, one of the nation’s greatest soccer stars whose best years were spent with Real Madrid. In contrast, Mexico’s best in baseball – and so many are *norteños* – make their headlines in places like Los Angeles and Chicago.⁸ Mexican baseball fans learn about American geography, in part, by following

their national baseball stars north of the border.⁹ A preference for one sport or another suggests that many Mexicans, whether they realize it or not, participate in a struggle between the cultures of the United States and Europe. Neither of these sports, after all, has anything to do with Mexico before 1850. That the northwestern states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California have a stronger bond with baseball is consistent with other cultural, economic, and political processes in which proximity to the United States determines a distinct regional identity vis-à-vis the center and south of Mexico.

Within Mexico, the difference in organizational sophistication between baseball in the northwest and soccer elsewhere illuminates a larger center-periphery phenomenon in the country. Mexico City has always been the center of national political decision-making in the country. But the regions have played a significant role as well. Sonora was home to some of Mexico's biggest mining operations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and wages were highest in the north during that time.¹⁰ It was the site of distinct revolutionary forces in 1910-11; its attitudes helped create a Catholic-based party, the PAN, in opposition to the official PRI; and two presidents, Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elias Calles, hailed from the state, forming the core of the "Sonoran dynasty" in Mexican politics.¹¹ Presently, it is the maquiladora-based economic growth in border cities like Tijuana, Mexicali, and Ciudad Juárez which stimulates the northern border region economies. Yet, northern cities remain second-class locations for the "national" game, soccer. If anything the fact that one region of the country is responsible for producing the national league or always hosting the national team's games points to a rather fractured sense of unity. Cities like Tijuana, Mexicali, Hermosillo, and Mazatlán do not even have teams to compete for the highest national soccer trophy.¹² None of

these cities have adequate facilities to play host to any World Cup qualifying games for the national men's team (virtually all of these are held in Mexico City). The northwest, despite large population centers, is largely seen as a backwater for the national sport.

Conversely, because the winner of the *Liga del Pacifico* represents Mexico at baseball's most important Latin American event, the league provides a rare opportunity for cities like Culiacán, Ciudad Obregón, or Mexicali: to represent the entire nation state at an international event, of sports or of any other variety. Additionally, one of the league's teams plays host to the *Serie del Caribe* every four years, bringing tourist dollars and an international spotlight otherwise unthinkable for boosters in most of these cities, with the obvious exception of the beach resort Mazatlán. Baseball allows northwestern Mexican cities to keep their communities "on the map" within Mexico and within the baseball world. All of this is a source of great pride in the region, and a factor in shaping local and regional identities in the shadow of the dominant capital city to the south.

In the northwestern states, there is much local diversity; the region is not culturally or geographically homogeneous. Sinaloa, which does not border the United States, is a much different cultural environment than, say, the border cities of Tijuana or Mexicali. Nevertheless, Sinaloa, like Sonora and Baja California Norte and Sur can reasonably be considered a border region because both individually and collectively, their economies are so closely tied to the United States. Mazatlán and Cabo San Lucas rely heavily on the dollars spent by tourists, many of them Americans. In many interactions it is, in fact, dollars not pesos, which change hands in this part of Mexico. Hermosillo, the state capital of Sonora, is home to a large Ford manufacturing plant; the economic well-being of thousands of Sonorans depends on decisions made in Detroit. The border cities

have even closer connections to the U.S., as many of the residents of those cities cross the border daily to work and shop.

Baseball is one component of many in these communities in which the lives of Americans and Mexicans intersect. English is heard and spoken, American food is consumed, U.S.-based companies are advertised on clothing worn, and American players are on the field. In a sense, baseball stadiums can be seen as small centers of border activity, where distinctly U.S.-Mexican activities occur. Because the game is discussed among co-workers the next day, or analyzed by personalities on the radio, what happens at the ballpark filters into the rest of the community. Baseball becomes a starting point for the appropriation of some forms of American culture, and for the contestation of American cultural hegemony. While hegemonic processes have led to an American game being played in Mexico, complete with the introduction of English-language terminology and music, and American food and clothing, there remain many aspects to an evening at a Mexican baseball game which do not have their roots in U.S. culture. *Banda* and *norteño* music is heard in abundance, particularly at games in Sinaloa cities; tacos are sold at every stadium. These Mexican cultural forms compete with their American equivalents, making the baseball stadium a “constant battlefield” for cultural hegemony.¹³

In what follows here, I offer evidence of the ways in which baseball is tied to the formation of self and group identities in Mexico’s northwest. Links between the state, private entrepreneurs, large corporations (including Major League Baseball), players, and those who choose to pay money to watch the games in the stands generate these various and competing identities. While the global marketplace seems to have a dominant

position in terms of the ways that baseball is organized in Mexico and other parts of Latin America, I found that there are many ways that specifically local and/or regional interests, including the state, shape the game and its performance, acting as a counterbalance to any domination from outside.

BODIES AND BOUNDARIES

Edgar González was an obvious selection to represent Mexico at the *Serie del Caribe* in 2003. Among the most talented baseball players in Mexico, González dominated most of the statistical categories for pitchers during the 2002-03 LMP season. Just twenty years old, González was picked by the league champion from Los Mochis to bolster the team that would represent the nation at the four-country championship series in Puerto Rico. But, in a twist that illustrates the ambiguity of national identities in the globalized realm of modern professional sports, González was denied the opportunity to play for Mexico. The Arizona Diamondbacks, with whom he was under contract at the time, blocked his participation over fears that his body had already worked enough over the winter months. With the help of a contract signed between Latin American winter leagues and Major League Baseball, the Diamondbacks were able to keep González rested and injury-free for their own upcoming season.¹⁴ With an opening on the roster, leaders of the Mexican delegation shopped around other teams in the LMP, and picked up Charles “Bubba” Smith, a thirty-one year old, 240-pound first baseman from North Carolina who has spent several seasons playing winter baseball in Mexicali.¹⁵ An aging American veteran, and not a bright young Mexican star, represented Mexico at the 2003 *Serie del Caribe*.

This very brief set of transactions, a seemingly microscopic incident in baseball history, illustrates the ways that the game is interconnected with notions of nationalism and global economics. The baseball industry, like other sports, demands that its participants choose between money and national pride. This is particularly the case in Latin America, where players leave their homes and families to play in culturally and linguistically different cities in the United States and Canada, in order to follow their dreams and earn a paycheck.¹⁶ The González case demonstrates just one of many ways that identity formation plays out in Mexican winter baseball. Americans represent cities in northwestern Mexico each game; players wear uniforms advertising products they may themselves never purchase nor support, but which they nevertheless help to sell and promote. People connected to baseball – in whatever way – are engaged in continuous negotiations over ways to perceive themselves as individuals and as associated groups.

Baseball is, like other modern sports, essentially about public athletic display, a “contested terrain” where competing ideas about the human body come into contact. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, sport is part of the “larger field of struggles over the definition of the *legitimate body* and the *legitimate use of the body*.”¹⁷ Conflicts over how the body should be displayed, understood, and talked about are waged under pretexts of dominant religious beliefs, political ideologies, gender identities, the rules of the marketplace, and a number of other controls on morality. In short, every element of a given culture contributes to the struggle over the “legitimate body” and the “legitimate use of the body.” This is “body culture,” a term used by Susan Brownell to refer to everything remotely involved with what people do with and to their physical form:

Body culture is a broad term that includes daily practices of health, hygiene, fitness, beauty, dress and decoration, as well as gestures, postures, manners, ways

of speaking and eating, and so on. It also includes the way these practices are trained into the body, the way the body is publicly displayed, and the lifestyle that is expressed in that display. Body culture reflects the internalization and incorporation of culture. Body culture is embodied culture.¹⁸

Representations of the male and female body are on display at stadiums each night, open to whatever applause, laughter, or ridicule their appearances may generate. That which draws cheers at one game can be expected back for an encore the following night; that which is scorned and criticized may not return again. The physical appearance of male athletes and female dancers, the clothing worn by spectators and performers alike – all of these aspects to a night at a Mexican baseball game are part of the process by which people think about themselves, their team, their city, and their country.

Dominant ideas about the public display of bodies in Mexico underwent significant changes in the late nineteenth century, during the same time that American traders, miners and railroaders introduced the game to Mexicans. Mexico's most influential men believed in the wonders of science and the doctrines of Positivism. The writings of two men in particular – Herbert Spencer and August Comte – had a profound impact on the intellectuals, journalists, and policy makers in the young Mexican state. In their linear concept of the development of humans, adherence to the laws of science was considered to be a final stage of human knowledge.¹⁹ Those nations like the United States, which were rapidly industrializing, offered clear proof to Mexican elites of the supposed truths of Positivism. Porfirio Díaz, whose lengthy stay in the presidential palace between 1876 and 1910 was largely attributable to economic development policies, believed that Mexico should follow American business practices and cultural norms if the nation was to “progress.”²⁰ Baseball, with all of its statistics, measurements, and demands for on-the-field precision, fit perfectly in the minds of Díaz and other

Mexican leaders who admired both the infallibility of science and the rapid economic growth of the United States. Baseball was a “civilized game” according to those of the “Porfirian persuasion” who enjoyed the “sense of sharing the same activities and attitudes of the international gentry.”²¹ To play or watch baseball was to be modern in late nineteenth century Mexico.

Díaz was only one of many Latin American leaders eager to embrace this visionary link between baseball and progress. Not only did those who felt this way wish to copy American business policy and recreational activities, they had Americans like Albert G. Spalding willing to sell them guidebooks and equipment to perfect their imitations. Spalding realized the power of organized games to build friendly relationships between Americans and the people of different lands. The game was to “follow the flag” in American business, political, and military pursuits.²² Baseball was also a convenient source of profits for go-getters such as Spalding, who were ready to sell Latin Americans and others however many bats, balls, gloves, and instructional booklets they could buy. From the outset, then, baseball carried connotations of American culture and the promise of profit for its promoters. The game was to be played by men, usually by foreigners, by members of social clubs, or by the employees of American-minded companies. The historical trajectory of soccer in Mexico follows a similar path with European connections. Imported forms of recreational activity were organized in a way that fostered the participation of a chosen few. Not all bodies were immediate candidates for civilization through sport.

The manifestation of body culture in organized Mexican baseball has evolved in a parallel process with Mexican political and economic history. The influence of the state,

state-backed industries, and later, global trade economics has literally been stamped on players' bodies. In the 1930s, "PNR-Hermosillo" was one of the strongest semi-professional teams in the region. Their uniforms consisted of the colors of the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, the official party (now the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI) and its acronym.²³ This, during a decade when the party's aim was to "consolidate" the gains of the Mexican Revolution through the redistribution of land and the nationalization of the Mexican petroleum industry. Party officials realized that sponsoring a strong baseball team would exemplify its own strength. By the 1950s, teams in the northwest took on names still used today – *Naranjeros*, *Algodoneros*, *Tomateros*, and *Cañeros* – which represented the dominant export crop in their respective regions. Perhaps of less significance now, these team nicknames nevertheless conveyed an image to the public that made industry magnates in the orange, cotton, tomato, and sugar cane industries all the more powerful. Their commercial enterprises were represented on the bodies of the players, connecting wealthy local interests to physical strength on the baseball diamond. Today, teams of the *Liga del Pacífico* don uniforms with as many as eight corporate logos, advertising everything from Volkswagen and Nestle to local newspapers and Mexican beer. The male body on Mexican baseball diamonds is literally a walking billboard. This on-field commercialization reflects the concessions granted to corporations in a country so affected by neo-liberal economic reforms since the 1980s.

If, as Brownell argues, "body culture is culture embodied" then spectator sports offer examples of the ways in which gender, race, politics, and economics have not only penetrated, but constituted, the cultural realm in Mexico. Ideas about what represents

Mexican culture – *lo mexicano* – are shaped by unequal social, political, and economic relations, within Mexican towns and cities, between Mexican regions, and between Mexico and other nation states. Through sports we can see how the “battle for control of the body” is being waged in societies.²⁴ Baseball reminds us of the prevalence of “male preserves” in Mexico, in which women are either paying spectators or dancing cheerleaders hired to increase attendance among males.²⁵ Player uniforms also aim to sell, whether the product is political ideology or consumer goods. The players themselves compete with one another to rise up the ranks, forever hopeful of a scout’s eye and a bigger financial contract somewhere down the road. Other more sedentary bodies choose to spend their money and leisure time watching both the players and the other spectators at the stadium. As Janet Lever illustrates in her study of Brazilian soccer, sports are able to bring people from various social classes together on a regular basis.²⁶ The congregation of so many individuals in one place allows for the display of many bodies performing a variety of roles, among them the expression of identity and culture.

The “bringing together” quality of sports is vital to recognizing how organized games help mold local identities. The work involved before, during, and after the game that allows two groups of men to play their nine innings each night involves thousands of participants. Some of these – namely the players – are in fact outsiders, and other than their performance on the field they may contribute very little to the actual staging of the sport spectacle. Countless others make their living grooming the field, selling souvenirs, repairing lights, pouring beer, or cleaning bathrooms. Promotion of the game, whether by radio or television broadcast, on the internet, or in newspapers, involves a number of

writers, technicians, and organizers. Visiting teams and their entourage of club officials and sports writers also provide work for hotel and restaurant workers. Finally, without spectators willing to pay money to watch the game, money would not circulate. These are very important economic links that make baseball a highly relevant component in daily lives in a given community.

The force connecting all of these participants in the baseball spectacle is the man willing to risk financial loss for the benefits of owning a local team. Team owners, when not large corporations, are usually local businessmen and/or government officials who wield substantial clout in the local community. The *Liga del Pacífico*'s most striking example of this figure is Juan Manuel Ley López, the owner of both the *Tomateros* in Culiacán and the grocery/department store chain "Ley" – the large signs of which are ubiquitous on the horizons of most cities in northwestern Mexico. Ley's family has long been a leader in local commerce, and his father started the *Tomateros* franchise in 1960.²⁷ Ley, like his counterparts in Major League Baseball, is willing to accept financial losses through baseball for the gains both to his prestige and to his other business interests.²⁸ He can be seen as a local philanthropist in a setting that disguises class differences by allowing all members of the community, in whatever way, to participate. Estadio General Angel Flores, where the *Tomateros* play their home games, is plastered with advertisements for the Ley stores, promoting both the business and the family name. These advertisements are not only in constant view to as many as 15,000 spectators inside the stadium, but to the thousands watching on television, who see the giant red lettered "LEY" signs as the backdrop for lofty fly balls and home runs. Ley's financial successes have been so great, in fact, that he also purchased another baseball team, the

Saraperos of Saltillo, which plays in Mexico's summer league. Here emerges the figure of the regional strongman, a type common in the history of northwestern Mexico, who not only controls large sectors of the regional economy, but who also appears to "give back" to the community in a reciprocal relationship through his sponsorship of baseball teams.

Another influential team owner, Mario López Valdez, provides the clearest example of the ways that baseball is tied to local politics. López Valdez is both the president of the *Cañeros* in Los Mochis, and the *Presidente Municipal*, the most important political office in his city.²⁹ López Valdez operates the team as though it were, in fact, part of his responsibilities as the local political boss. In addition to assembling the team roster, staff members with the *Cañeros* work on a variety of "community outreach" projects, many of which resemble state education programs.³⁰ In 2003, the team produced an education program involving print materials aimed at "enhancing the image of Mexico" among 1,200 school children in northern Sinaloa.³¹ The team's General Manager, Antonio Castro, describes as "true assimilation" the relationship between team and local government:

Here the team consists of – fortunately for us – around forty percent players from here in the region. From here in Los Mochis and from nearby *ejidos* and towns. When the team gets together [in the weeks before the start of the season each October] we visit rehabilitation centers, we visit local jails, we visit senior citizen assistance homes. This is the social work we do. We go to schools, elementary schools, and when the American players arrive, to bilingual schools. We attend social events, inaugurations, and awards ceremonies for local youth baseball.³²

The *Cañeros* are, perhaps, an exception. The *Aguilas* in Mexicali and the *Naranjeros* in Hermosillo also have publicly visible team presidents who are deeply involved in local business, but neither of these teams is so obviously integrated with local government.

Of course, the emerging form of team ownership is that of the corporation. That large corporations now run half of the LMP teams reflects a larger trend in Mexico over the past two decades. Corporate ownership allows what would otherwise be relatively small local businesses to operate with the necessary financial backing to keep up with the constantly rising costs associated with professional baseball, particularly player salaries. But like other corporate operations in Mexico, particularly since the inception of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, there is a high degree of anonymity involved with team ownership. Rather than having an individual face to connect with the owner, fans now generally associate ownership of, say the *Yaquis* of Ciudad Obregón, with the Modelo brewery.³³ By bankrolling the local baseball team, the brewery has unrestricted access to the marketing of its products at the stadium and on all team merchandise. In this light, Ley López in Culiacán represents somewhat of an anomaly. As owner of both the team and of the Ley chain of stores, his images remains directly connected to the successes and failures of the *Tomateros*. For other team administrators, maintaining a high publicity post with the team depends in large part on one's ability to maneuver within corporate politics.

Just what are corporations that own teams, or powerful businessmen like Juan Manuel Ley “giving back” by maintaining a baseball franchise in a city in exchange for financial gain and/or personal prestige? Baseball provides a combination of economic worth, civic pride, and cultural diversity to cities in northwestern Mexico. So-called “economic impact” studies for baseball in Mexico do not exist. But if we make rough estimates about the number of people who work at the stadium alone, we can see how many people rely on the playing of baseball games for their daily income. At an average

LMP game, there may be 20 selling beer; 20 preparing and selling food; 15 selling or taking tickets; 5 doing cleaning and maintenance; 15 working on radio, television, lighting and other technical matters; 4 selling souvenirs; as many as 10 working in various promotional activities; 5 working as ground maintenance staff; 4 umpires; and more than 60 men in uniforms, as players, trainers, or coaches. These are conservative figures for some of the larger facilities, such as those in Mazatlán, Culiacán, Ciudad Obregón, and Hermosillo. They also do not include the men, women, and children who work immediately outside the stadium at taco stands, at shoeshine benches, and as taxi drivers. Regardless of their pay, these people rely on baseball to boost their daily wages, if it does not constitute their only source of income. Their sense of being in an economic sense is tied to the game.

There is also a belief among the communities of northwestern Mexico that it is important to have a team in the *Liga del Pacífico* to maintain a certain level of civic pride. As Ronald Frankenberg argued in his study of Welsh communities near the border with England, regional and national leagues are important entities for generating community identity and pride.³⁴ If “other villages have teams” he writes, “it is considered that each important village should be represented in its local league in order to maintain its prestige.”³⁵ Juan Aguirre, an executive with the *Naranjeros* club in Hermosillo expressed this same point by comparing the difference between his city and Guaymas, the latter having lost its *Liga del Pacífico* team during the years of the peso collapse of the early 1980s:

Really, it [the *Naranjeros*] is very symbolic for the community. The *Naranjeros* aren't just the *Naranjeros*. It's a sense of pride, especially for the kids, to wear the hat of the *Naranjeros*. If they go to the United States they go around with their hats on, or to somewhere else, with their jackets on. It's a symbol, a symbol

of the community... We went to Guaymas last October to play some exhibition games – Los Mochis, Obregon, and us, the *Naranjeros*. And *damn* the people are hungry for baseball there. That’s how I imagine Hermosillo without the *Naranjeros*. A lost city.³⁶

Aguirre realizes the symbolic importance of baseball, and more specifically the *Naranjeros*, for the youths of Hermosillo, particularly when they are away from the city. Youngsters, he suggests, proclaim their identity as *hermosillenses* when they are physically elsewhere, whether that be in some other part of Mexico or in the United States. Without such a symbol Aguirre feels, and he is not alone, that Hermosillo would be “lost” or somehow taken off a map of important places, as he apparently considers Guaymas to be.

Although the baseball season is relatively short – four months from October to January – the *Liga del Pacífico* plays an important role in providing a form of affordable entertainment for the residents of the eight cities in which it operates. The bright lights of the baseball stadium on a brisk December evening are a beacon to people for miles around, announcing that the spectacle is underway. Rural baseball *aficionados* can make the drive in from their small towns or villages to see a game in one of these cities to cap off a day of shopping or conducting other business. Ticket prices start as low as 10 pesos, or roughly one U.S. dollar in almost all of the stadiums. This is less than it costs to see a film at a local cinema, making it a cheaper option for couples with children, or for groups of friends. It is certainly more affordable than attending concerts or plays in places like Mazatlán and Mexicali where large venues exist for such events. If professional soccer is played in one of these cities it is, with the exception of Culiacán, of a lesser quality, and certainly without the historical local importance attached to baseball. For those children who play baseball, the *Naranjeros*, *Tomateros*, and other teams

represent upward mobility. In the sense that the game is globalized – played and watched by millions – these teams also represent modernity as well. People form opinions about the places in which they live based upon the opportunities available or lacking there. Many residents of the cities of the *Liga del Pacífico* make the symbolic connection, as Juan Aguirre does, between baseball and the qualities of a culturally diverse, desirable place in which to live.

REGIONALISM AND THE UNDERMINING OF UNIFIED NATIONALISM

Among narratives that suggest the more populated center of the country “has more” than do the hinterlands of the northwest, especially when it comes to cultural activities, baseball is a regional asset. Given the *Liga del Pacífico*’s unique niche as the circuit that provides Mexico’s national representative at the *Serie del Caribe*, baseball gives residents of the northwest something to claim that they *do* have – something which the more economically and politically powerful south, does not. The league itself is symbolic of a distinct regionalism in northwestern Mexico, a regional identity with deep historical roots.

Always distant from the centers of power and decision-making in Mexico City, the northwestern states are peripheral territory in Mexico. Since independence, the region represented the northern frontier for Mexico, the lands saved from American expropriation in the war from 1846-48. Much of the popular history told about Mexico, by artists and in state-funded education curricula, concerns events that took place in the center of the country, the *Altiplano Central*. Most of those represented in the stories are Aztec warriors or Spanish *conquistadores*, and almost none of these characters set foot in

northwestern Mexico. As they pertain to the northwest, these narratives only begin to develop with the arrival of colonial administrators and Catholic priests, and carry on through the “civilization” process, which though not explicitly analyzed, included the killings by disease or warfare of untold numbers of indigenous men, women, and children. Without extensive written records about thousands of years of indigenous occupation, the “true” history of the region has, as its “starting point,” the arrival of white-skinned Europeans.³⁷

Historical narratives are powerful devices for defining what eventually become the “center” and the “periphery” within nation states. Much of the symbolism of national heritage in Mexico concerns Mexico City, the center. The Mexican flag, for example, depicts an Aztec legend about the founding of what is now Mexico City. The country’s largest stadium – Azteca, used largely for soccer – hearkens back to this specifically Aztec chapter of Mexico’s past. National creation myths and the naming of prominent places are only two examples of a network of cultural and linguistic devices that place the *Altiplano Central* at the center and everywhere else within Mexico as somehow peripheral to it.

So, what role does sport play in fostering differences and/or similarities between center and periphery? The theory of sports as a national unifier has its practical limits. Lever’s study on soccer in Brazil demonstrated that the state and the economically powerful supported the game because they realized its potential to bring the masses together for common national purposes.³⁸ Soccer’s “divide-and-unify role” not only pits people of the same nationality against one another when their competing clubs meet on the field, it also allows people of similar backgrounds to come together for games and

social events that accompany the operation of a club team in Brazil.³⁹ At the same time, all Brazilians, from all backgrounds, are able to enjoy the successes of the national team on the international stage.⁴⁰ But if we understand national integration to mean a more equal distribution of opportunities for education and health care, of employment, or of standards of living, then the daily realities of poverty and marginalization which manifest the differences between center and periphery will not be solved through sport.

The structure of professional baseball in Mexico suggests that the sport works to undermine a unified sense of national identity. With the exception of Culiacán, where in 2004 the *Dorados* advanced to Mexico's premier soccer league, attendance at baseball games in the northwest dwarf those of soccer.⁴¹ In most of the northwestern cities like Hermosillo and Mexicali, baseball is the only professional spectator sport of importance. This is not to say that soccer is not important in these communities, for the game is most certainly followed throughout all of Mexico. But baseball allows the northwest to set itself aside from the rest of the country when it comes to professional sports. Not only does the winner of the LMP represent all of Mexico at the *Serie del Caribe*, but a majority of the game's best players come from states in the border region. Baseball's unique place in the minds of northwestern Mexicans parallels the regional difference that has always existed between the center of the country and its northern periphery.

People in the northwest have adopted their own narratives about the differences between their region and the rest of Mexico, through sport. Having seen many newcomers to Ciudad Obregón over six decades, baseball writer Alfonso Araujo Bojórquez contends that people from Mexico City undergo a sort of sports transformation when they move to Sonora:

A lot of people that I know that have come here from the center of the country, they get there, and because there is not football, well, they have to go to baseball games. Then, they have told me, 'look, I didn't like baseball when I was there [Mexico City], but now that I'm here now I don't like soccer.' Or they'll say, 'I like soccer as much as baseball.' In other words, baseball gains followers here simply because it has always been the number one sport.⁴²

The idea that baseball is somehow ingrained in the very fabric of society in the northwestern states – native to it – is evident in phrases like “has always been the number one sport.” There are clearly two sides to the struggle over one's sports identities: football and its Mexico City connotations, or baseball and its ties to the northwestern states. This Sonoran maintains that once in the northwestern states, those from the capital and other parts of central Mexico recognize the merits of baseball when compared to soccer. They either prefer soccer or place it on even par with their newly adopted game, baseball. Regardless of that choice, Araujo (and apparently his friends too) make the distinction between the northwestern states and the center of Mexico through sports.

A distinct northwestern regional identity and the competing ideas about what constitutes Mexican nationalism are further complicated by the region's proximity to the United States. The northwestern states are situated between two domineering cultural entities: the one which generates images of a Mexican national identity based in Mexico City, and the English-speaking American colossus to the north. Essentially a globalized game, baseball has nevertheless served to reinforce regional interests and regional identities in northwestern Mexico. In large part this is due to the structure of the international baseball calendar, which has propelled Latin America's winter leagues to the forefront of non-U.S. baseball. By claiming the highest rank of winter baseball in Mexico, the northwest – as a region – has placed itself on par with three nation states that compete for the annual *Serie del Caribe*. When people who attend this event refer to the

Mexican team, they are essentially talking about the communities of the northwest. This may be of little significance to the Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, whose leagues tend to be spread out geographically over those island countries. But for those of northwestern Mexico, the *Serie del Caribe* represents a chance to display both their distinctly northwestern culture and their pride in representing the country as a whole. The Mexican delegation usually includes *banda* musicians and large *sombreros* and signs made for the television crews, bidding hello to friends and family in Sonora, Sinaloa, or Baja California.⁴³ National pride is on the line for the four countries participating in this international event, but for Mexico there is an added ingredient: a chance to parade regional pride.

THE INTERNATIONAL PASTIME

Baseball and other modern sports serve as useful venues to watch the processes of globalization. On a given day in 2004, a Korean will pitch for Boston, a Venezuelan will play in Japan, Americans will bat for Dominican teams, a Panamanian will take infield in Mexico, and Dominicans will play for a team based in Canada. Equipment is made in the United States, China, and Japan. Games are broadcast all over the world via satellite in a variety of languages. Players from one country are bought and sold through overseas phone conversations, faxes, and e-mail messages. The game provides a vantage point for the dealings of the international marketplace and the generation of transnational ways of thinking and being.

Today, the LMP and other Latin American winter leagues operate under a set of legal rules and restrictions set forth by American baseball organizers. By maintaining

leverage over its contracted players who take part in the Latin American winter leagues, Major League teams can dictate who can play in Latin American leagues. They are essentially protecting their investments abroad. The LMP operates with an “import rule” which determines how many foreign-born players each team can keep on its roster. Theoretically, only the teams would lower the number. The percentage of import players in all professional sports is regulated by the national government.⁴⁴ These players are almost always Americans. The number of *extranjeros* in the *Liga del Pacífico* has fluctuated between no limits and the present level, six. Fans are acutely aware of the names and Major League contract status of the six foreign players on their teams.⁴⁵ However much league and team executives may want to increase the number of imports on each club to enhance the reputation of the league, they nevertheless adhere to state regulations and maintain their import limits as a way to protect space on Mexican teams for Mexican players.⁴⁶ The international quality of the sport is still guarded closely by American capitalists and Mexican government authorities who monitor and regulate the game.

The state, in fact, has found two ways to maintain an important role in baseball in Mexico: stadium facilities, and control over players’ contracts. When the *Liga del Pacífico* signed an agreement with Major League Baseball in the early 1970s to allow players under big league contracts to play in Mexico, teams found themselves scrambling to make stadium improvements mandated in the new contract. Local and state governments came to their collective rescue. In four cities, entirely new stadiums were built with government money.⁴⁷ In the other stadiums, state governments paid for extensive renovations. Sonora’s governor used the opportunity to promote the game

statewide, not only building new facilities for the professional teams in Hermosillo, Ciudad Obregón, and Navajoa, but also building more than 100 new diamonds in towns and cities throughout the state.⁴⁸ Stadium construction and financial support for smaller local ball fields were promoted in terms of the positive qualities of baseball for communities in the state.

In terms of player contracts, the Mexican government has sided with team owners in Mexico's summer league to make it more unlikely that the country will lose all of its top players to Major League Baseball. Unlike in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, where Major League teams have built training facilities and sign hundreds of teenagers per year, or in Puerto Rico, where young players are subject to the U.S. amateur draft, young Mexican players usually start their careers at the nation's player development academy near Monterrey.⁴⁹ Unless an American scout has found him before the age of 18, a player anywhere in Mexico reports to the national academy and is eventually distributed through a draft to one of Mexico's professional teams, which will then hold the rights to that player. Should a Major League team want to acquire him, it would have to buy the contract from his Mexican team. This arrangement has in turn led to the escalation of signing bonuses being demanded by Mexican players who are under the age of 18 and who do come into contact with U.S. scouts. José Carlos Campos, a baseball writer in Culiacán, claims that the average Mexican teenage recruit is asking for five times the signing bonus that a prospect from the Dominican Republic demands.⁵⁰ State support for this player contract scenario suggests that the state views baseball players as national commodities, not to be sold away easily. Even in the highly profitable world of

baseball, the Mexican government has found ways to counter the powerful forces of the global marketplace.

CONCLUSION

Baseball stadiums are social gathering places in northwestern Mexico, and the teams that play in them are sources of both civic and regional pride. Team owners, large corporations, and other advertisers all recognize this quality. There is a bond between members of the community who choose to spend their time and money at the ballpark, and “the product” itself, the group of men who wear the uniform of the local team. Businessmen and large corporations in the northwestern states have capitalized on this bond, staking their investment dollars on promotion of professional baseball. By doing so, they exert high degrees of influence on local and regional culture, and the ways in which people think about themselves and their community through baseball.

The state, too, has recognized the significance of the game. Since the 1930s, when the ruling party in Mexico pinned its name on a local baseball team in Hermosillo, the state’s involvement in baseball remained steady. Gone are the days of naming stadiums after the heroes of the Mexican Revolution, or after the Revolution itself. But the stadium construction and renovation boom of the early 1970s made it clear that the state was still involved. Government money paid for most of the construction costs, and it was obvious that team executives shared close relations with those politicians who made sure the money was available. In Los Mochis, where the team owner is also the head of local government, the connection between sport and state is secured through one individual. In other cities, the state provides for baseball when local friendships and

business relationships necessitate such involvement. There is, then, still a role for the state to play in the staging of professional baseball in countries like Mexico.

In many Latin American countries, namely Argentina and Brazil, soccer dominates the headlines of sports pages, leaving little room for the other professional sports that vie for attention in those countries. It is not this way in Mexico. A mix of geographic, political, and economic realities created two spheres: the larger one in which soccer *does* dominate, and a smaller regional one where baseball is “king.” To complicate matters, and to make them that much more interesting, the region in question is essentially a border zone where ecologies, economies, cultures, and identities are shared. This is what makes northwestern Mexico an ideal place for the study of sports. In Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California, not only are personal and local identities tied up in the act of playing or watching professional sports, but also an entire regional identity is expressed through the popularity of baseball vis-à-vis soccer in the rest of the country. This, in turn, undermines beliefs in an all-encompassing Mexican identity to which all Mexicans adhere. Deeply rooted in the political, economic, and cultural history of the area, baseball speaks to a series of identity formation processes. Like the country itself, all of these identities – personal, local, regional, national, border, consumer, gender, racial – are contested, contradictory, and in constant change.

NOTES

¹ Interview with Jose Carlos Campos, columnist with *El Debate de Culiacán* and Operations Manager with *los Tomateros de Culiacán*. Conducted at Culiacán, Sinaloa, 5 November 2003. Translations of all Spanish-language interviews, and primary and secondary sources, are the author's.

² Ricardo Avila Palafox y Tomas Calvo Buezas, comps. *Identidades, Nacionalismos y Regiones*. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1993. Two essays in this collection were particularly influential in developing my ideas about identity and identity formation. See Palafox, "Elites, región e identidad en el Occidente de México," pp. 15-35, and Carmelo Lison Tolosana, "Identidad: collage cultural. Las multiples voces de la identidad," pp. 37-47. Quoted phrases are from Tolosana, p. 38.

³ Ramon Eduardo Ruíz. *The People of Sonora and Yankee Capitalists*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988: pp. 7-25.

⁴ Alan M. Klein. *Baseball on the Border: A Tale of Two Laredos*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994: pp. 6-7.

⁵ Sergio Ortega Noriega. *Breve Historia de Sinaloa*. México, D.F.: Fideicomiso Historia de la Américas, 1999: p. 257; Ramon Eduardo Ruíz. *Triumphs and Tragedy: A History of the Mexican People*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992: p. 283.

⁶ T.D. Proffitt, III. *Tijuana: The History of a Mexican Metropolis*. San Diego: San Diego State University, 1994: p. 153.

⁷ Stuart Hall. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" in Raphael Samuel, ed. *People's History and Socialist Theory*. London: Kegan Paul, 1981: pp. 227-240.

⁸ Percentages fluctuate, as team rosters in Mexico change weekly during the season. However, players whose hometown is listed as being in Baja California Norte, Baja California Sur, Sonora, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, or Tamaulipas generally make up between fifty and seventy-five percent of all players on a given roster. These are the states that border the United States, and include Baja California Sur and Sinaloa, which I refer to as border region states. Eleven of the fifteen Mexicans listed on Major League rosters in May 2004 were from border region states: five from Sonora, four from Sinaloa, one from Baja California, and one from Tamaulipas.

⁹ A fan seated next to me during a game in Culiacan explained that by following his Mexican baseball idols through their careers in the Major Leagues, he gave himself an education in U.S. geography. See also Bruce Kidd, "Sport, Dependency, and the Canadian State" in Hart Cantelon and Richard Gruneau, eds. *Sport, Culture, and the Modern State*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982: pp. 281-303. Kidd contends that "generations of Canadian boys grew up wearing (and never taking off) sweaters celebrating the cities of another country" pp. 291-292.

¹⁰ Ruíz, *Triumphs and Tragedy*, p. 281.

¹¹ Michael A.J. Ard. *An Eternal Struggle: How the National Action Party Transformed Mexican Politics*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003: pp. 21-93.

¹² Mexico's premier soccer league did not have a team located in the northwestern states until the summer of 2004, when the Culiacán *Dorados* advanced.

¹³ Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" p. 233.

¹⁴ This refers to the "Winter League Agreements," a set of contracts between Major League Baseball and the Latin American winter leagues in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. The agreements, slightly modified each season if at all, have, since the early 1970s, regulated the participation of players under Major League contracts playing in Latin America during the U.S. off-season.

¹⁵ For a summary of the selection process for the Mexican team that participated in the 2003 Serie del Caribe see Notimex news story of 30 January 2003 at "Beisbol Professional" web site: <<http://www.beisbolprofesional.net/bp0173.htm>> Viewed 1 March 2003.

¹⁶ Cuba represents the extreme example of this. Cuban players who decide to leave the island to play in the Major Leagues do so with the understanding that they may very well be leaving Cuba for good. Cuba stopped participating in the Serie del Caribe shortly after the Castro Revolution in 1959, and has been excluded from organized American baseball ever since.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, "How can one be a sports fan?" in Simon During, ed. *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1993: pp. 339-356. Italics in original.

¹⁸ Susan Brownell. *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995: pp. 10-11.

¹⁹ August Comte, "The Positive Philosophy: in Carlos B. Gil, ed. *The Age of Porfirio Díaz: Selected Readings*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977: pp. 45-48.

²⁰ William H. Beezley. *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987: p. 14.

²¹ William H. Beezley, "The Rise of Baseball in Mexico and the First Valenzuela." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*. v. 4, (1985): pp. 3-13.

²² Albert G. Spalding. *Baseball: America's National Game, 1839-1915*. 1911. Reprint. San Francisco: Halo Books, 1991: p. 9.

²³ Angel Encinas Blanco. *El Beisbol en Hermosillo*. Hermosillo: Editora Voz de Sonora, 1999: pp. 87-88.

²⁴ John Hargreaves. *Sport, Power, and Culture: A Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986: p. 13.

²⁵ Almost all of the Liga del Pacífico teams have between-inning dances performed by provocatively dressed young women, usually in clothing which advertises beer, but sometimes in thematic style dress.

²⁶ Janet Lever. *Soccer Madness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983: pp. 8-9, 145-154.

²⁷ Interview with José Carlos Campos, conducted at Culiacán, Sinaloa, 5 November 2003. See also "Historia de Tomateros de Culiacán" on the Tomateros web site: <<http://www.tomateros.com.mx/historia/default.asp>>. Viewed 9 October 2003.

²⁸ Jese W. Markham and Paul V. Telpitz. *Baseball Economics and Public Policy*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1981: pp. 26-27. Baseball owners maintain strict privacy about their supposed losses. Markham and Teplitz, whose work was

commissioned by the U.S. government to offer lawmakers a reference guide for dealing with the economics of baseball, obtained information from only a handful of owners of Major League teams. See also Rich Schultz. *El Rey de los Deportes: A History of Baseball in Northwestern Mexico*. M.A. Thesis. La Jolla: University of California San Diego, 2004: pp. 141-144. Juan Manuel Ley López invokes Mexican privacy laws to keep him from stating what the Tomateros and his summer league team, the Saraperos actually earn or lose each season. The public in Mexico has no way of knowing whether his baseball franchises are money makers, or money losers.

²⁹ Interview with Antonio Castro Chavez, General Manager of the *Cañeros* of Los Mochis. Conducted at Los Mochis, Sinaloa, 11 November 2003.

³⁰ Interview with Antonio Castro Chavez, 11 November 2003.

³¹ Interview with Antonio Castro Chavez, 11 November 2003.

³² Interview with Antonio Castro Chavez, 11 November 2003.

³³ Interview with Alfonso Araujo Bojórquez, columnist and baseball historian.

Conducted at Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, 13 November 2003.

³⁴ Ronald Frankenberg. *Village on the Border: A Social Study of Religion, Politics, and Football in a North Wales Community*. London: Cohen and West, 1957.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³⁶ Interview with Juan Aguirre, Public Relations Director for the *Naranjeros* of Hermosillo. Conducted at Hermosillo, Sonora, 13 November 2003.

³⁷ Avila Palafox, "Elites, región e identidad..." p. 25.

³⁸ Lever, *Soccer Madness*, pp. 8-9, 145-154.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Of cities in the LMP, only Culiacán enjoys high levels of fan support for both baseball and soccer. Crowds for both sports usually top 10,000 per game.

⁴² Interview with Alfonso Araujo Bojórquez, conducted at Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, 13 November 2003.

⁴³ This is based on observations made by the author while watching television coverage of the Serie del Caribe in 2003 (in Puerto Rico), 2004 (in the Dominican Republic) and 2005 (held in Mazatlán). In each of these series, Mexico was represented by a team from Sinaloa.

⁴⁴ David G. LaFrance, "Labor, the State, and Professional Baseball in Mexico in the 1980s" in Joseph L. Arbena and David G. LaFrance, eds. *Sport in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2002: pp. 89-115. See p. 109.

⁴⁵ It is not unusual to enter into discussions with Mexican baseball fans who are highly aware of which Major League clubs had signed both foreign-born and Mexican players, not only on their local team, but also with regard to the players on other teams.

⁴⁶ Interview with Oviel Dennis, General Manager of the Liga Mexicana del Pacífico. Conducted at Culiacán, Sinaloa, 10 November 2003.

⁴⁷ Interview with Alfonso Araujo Bojórquez, conducted at Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, 13 November 2003.

⁴⁸ "Reconocimiento del Beisbol Mexicano al Gobernador Faustino Felix Serna." *El Imparcial* (Hermosillo). 27 Feb. 1971: p. A4.

⁴⁹ José Carlos Campos, “Justicia para los mas valiosos.” *El Debate de Culiacán*. 5 Nov. 2003: p. 8-B; Interview with José Carlos Campos, conducted at Culiacán, Sinaloa, 5 November 2003.

⁵⁰ Interview with José Carlos Camps, conducted at Culiacán, Sinaloa, 5 November 2003.