Latinos in U S Sport
A History of Isolation, Cultural Identity, and Acceptance

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In his work on the use of athletics for imperial purposes, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism*, Gerald R. Gems argues that sports such as baseball played a significant role in efforts to assimilate at least some (*better*) elements of the disparate groups that Americans encountered throughout the world during the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th century. In places such as Cuba, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Hawaii, the "Yanquis" used their sports as a way to impart specific values and character traits they believed necessary for succeeding in a modern capitalistic society. Likewise, on the U.S. mainland, athletic pursuits were also employed as a way to teach positive attributes to Russian and Eastern European Jews, Italian Americans, Asian Americans, and other "foreigners" during the early part of the 20th century.1 This is not to say that the intended students (both in the United States and outside the national borders) in such relationships necessarily drew the correct conclusions about sport. Specifically, as noted by C.L.R. James, many of the "inferiors" became quite adept at playing American and British sports and used success, sometimes against teams composed of colonists, in order to challenge assumptions about racial and ethnic limitations.2

The Spanish-speaking people who lived in the United States during the last decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century confronted similar circumstances as political and academic leaders, worried about the growth of what they perceived as "inferior" people in certain territories, sought to use athletic training in an effort to better this segment of the American population. An example of this effort is documented in David Julian Chavez's 1923 master's thesis from

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**1860s-1920s**

1869-1887 Esteban Bellan plays in the major leagues; he is the first Latino to do so.

1884 Reports indicate that baseball is being played in the heavily Mexican American city of Laredo, Texas.

1892 First high school football game is played in Texas. By 1911, the game has spread to the Rio Grande Valley and other predominantly Mexican American locales.

1893 Solomon Garcia Smith boxes for the world crown at Coney Island. He wins the title in 1897.

1902 Founding of first YMCA in Mexico City. Among the offerings is instruction on playing basketball.
the University of Texas titled "Civic Education of the Spanish American," which reveals how some in the educational and lawmaking community wished to use sports and other training in order to more fully integrate Spanish-speaking pupils into American society. Chavez's work is a full-length discussion of the steps necessary for improving the lives of people he refers to as Spanish-Americans (but who are more correctly referred to as Mexican Americans) by inculcating in them a sense of the characteristics critical for success in American society. This study covers a broad range of topics, from teaching children how to speak English to instructing them in the notions of self-control, self-reliance, initiative, adaptability, teamwork, cleanliness, and the "acquisition of the requisite mental attitudes: national consciousness . . . historic [American] sense [and proper] civic judgment."

Not surprisingly, sports were considered a key component of this regimen in turning the wayward Spanish speakers into "real" Americans. Chavez suggests that schools in the Lone Star State maintain a generous stock of sport equipment as part of this program, including baseball bats and gloves, volleyballs and nets, and weights. The purpose for such items was to teach sports so that the pupils could better amalgamate into American society. Chavez contends that enough effort in this area would demonstrate that . . . if enough time is given to the civic education of the Spanish-American through physical exercise and play in adequately equipped playgrounds and under expert supervision, as is being done in the best school systems of American cities, there is every reason to believe that the Spanish-American will become as efficient a citizen as those of other nationalities. There is much idle talk to the effect that the Spanish-Americans are an inferior stock out of which it is difficult if not impossible to develop American citizens. This is a grave error as anyone who knows Spanish-Americans long enough will testify.

Another critical aspect of this effort was not only to teach the children the values of competition and teamwork but also to instruct the often "dirty" Mexicans on all manner of proper hygiene:

The necessity for establishing the ideal of cleanliness in the average Spanish-American can hardly be exaggerated; this is especially true of those in whom the Mexican or Indian blood preponderates. He should be made to understand that his physical well-being, as well as his social standing, depends to a great extent on this virtue. Uncivilized people are dirty; civilized people are clean. . . . The first step can be developed by showing him that, if his non-Spanish-American associates slight him, it is because he is dirty and must suffer the consequences of ostracism . . . The Spanish-American is very sensitive and so will soon feel this so deeply that he will establish the habit . . . in order to maintain
his self-respect and to enjoy the companionship in
the upper classes for which his heart yearns.3

Clearly, Chavez would argue, there were many benefits
to imparting such knowledge to students in America’s class-
rooms. While recognizing the costs involved, Chavez blithely
believed that local school boards, in cooperation with con-
cerned parents, could easily afford and maintain all of the
apparatus and materials for the undertaking. Not surprisingly,
the history of failures by Texas’ schools to properly address
both the intellectual and physical needs of Mexican American
children counters this cheery assumption.4 The children who
played sports at schools throughout Texas (and elsewhere in
the Southwest) during the years covered in this chapter not
only overcame stereotypes about their character and physical
abilities but also surmounted serious economic issues in order
to pursue athletic dreams.5

The first two chapters of this work focus on the sports and
diversions that Spanish-speaking people brought to the New
World (and the variations that developed therein) during the
16th through the late 19th centuries (roughly between 1519
and 1880). In tune with one of our major themes, the previ-
sous sections demonstrate how over the years this population
used and enjoyed a variety of competitive events as part of
daily existence and expressive culture and how they employed
athletic and leisure activities as a way to hold on to important
aspects of their customs in what was quickly becoming a dra-
matically different society beginning with the United States’
takeover of what had been northern Mexico in the late 1840s.
As a growing number of Americans moved into what is now
referred to as the Southwest, they brought sports such as base-
ball, football, and basketball into the territories captured in
1848. We also witnessed how some Spanish-surnamed people
became adept in the new sports of their Anglo neighbors and,
through effort and talent, sought to demonstrate their wor-
thiness to fit into and participate more fully and equally in
the burgeoning society (our second major theme). Although
playing the Americans’ game helped to break down some
barriers, as the scholar of baseball history Joel S. Franks has
noted, the new sports in places such as California more often
than not did not eliminate all obstacles but instead provided
“service to those erecting and reinforcing barriers to greater
social, political, and economic equality.”6

Between the 1880s and 1930, three major historical trends
further affected the athletic and pastime endeavors of the
Spanish speakers living in the United States. First, by the latter years of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century, the Southwest was more fully integrated into the national economy, society, and body politic. As many of the writers who have examined this difficult process and period have noted, the whites who ventured into this area brought with them not only their economic, political, and social practices but also firm assumptions about the intellectual and physical traits and abilities (or lack thereof) of their new neighbors. Suffice it to say that many who encountered and interacted with Spanish speakers of the Southwest did not hold the nation’s newest citizens in very high regard. Further, the recent arrivals strongly perceived themselves as vastly superior in all manner of intellectual and corporeal undertakings. Over the early years of the 20th century, such notions found expression in an array of magazines, newspapers, journals, and academic research projects; not surprisingly, this trend ultimately had a deleterious impact on the Spanish-surnamed people in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and elsewhere.

Second, beginning in the latter part of the 1800s, U.S. imperial and economic might expanded into other parts of the Spanish-speaking world such as the Caribbean and Central and South America. As the American presence penetrated new regions, the intruders introduced their games to other nationalities. During this time, for example, the United States’ national pastime of baseball came to be known as beisbol to millions of aficionados in Cuba and later on in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and elsewhere. Similar to what was happening in the U.S. Southwest, the Americans who helped to establish the plethora of sugar mills, tobacco farms, railroads, factories, and other industrial facilities believed it to be part of their patriotic and religious duty to help “civilize” the various lands. This statement does not imply that the reason for baseball’s arrival in these regions was exclusively an American project; as several authors of the history of the sport in Cuba and elsewhere have correctly noted, individuals from these regions who were introduced to the game in the United States actively participated in bringing the new sport to their homelands. Baseball and eventually other games, however, would be part of the effort to modernize the peoples of Latin America and teach them how to think strategically and scientifically as well as to improve the Spanish speakers’ less-developed physiques.

Finally, during the first three decades of the 1900s, the expansion of business interests (especially agribusiness and the railroad) created jobs (mostly unskilled) for laborers throughout all parts of the United States. Many Spanish-surnamed men, women, and children answered the call by employers and, as communities grew in places such as Los Angeles, Chicago, El Paso, Detroit, and the plantations of Hawaii, sports became or remained an integral part of daily ethnic life as well as a vehicle with which to challenge negative and stereotypical assumptions by the major-
ity. In addition, as the children of the thousands of miners, track workers for railroads, sugar beet workers, and other low-wage laborers who came to the United States during the years before 1930 (many to avoid the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1921) began attending American schools (even if only sporadically), they were introduced to or given an opportunity to play and come to appreciate and even love the sports of the United States' majority population.

Chapter 3, therefore, examines how various groups of Latinos became involved, and successful, in playing a variety of sports at a variety of levels in the United States between the 1880s and 1930. The sports include baseball, football, soccer, basketball, boxing, and track. In addition, this chapter discusses the impact of these sports on rural and urban communities in various parts of the nation. However, before beginning to detail the history and accomplishments of specific individuals, teams, and leagues, it is necessary to document another aspect of the athletic history of Spanish speakers in the United States, one that has not received much attention: the perceived physical, moral, and intellectual weaknesses of the Spanish-surnamed people within the boundaries of the United States. In the assessment of some in the nation, the weak and not very bright progeny of conquistadors and native people could never measure up to the standards set by their conquerors and employers (and they certainly would not be able to compete with and defeat the Yankees at their own games).

**Athletic Ability of Latinos**

The trouncing of Mexican arms, both by Texas rebels and later on by the U.S. forces in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), confirmed in the minds of many whites that the expanding northern colossus was superior to Mexico, not just militarily but in most aspects of life (the notion of Manifest Destiny). Over the past two decades, various historians have captured glimpses of the utter contempt with which many Americans viewed their neighbors to the south (and their descendants within the borders of the nation). The works of three individuals, Arnoldo De León, Mark C. Anderson, and Natalia Molina, will suffice in demonstrating the point.9

In his masterful 1983 study of white racial perceptions in 19th-century Texas, Arnoldo De León laid out documentary evidence of how the newly arrived Americans in the 1820s
and 1830s perceived their neighbors. In particular, he argues that the immigrants thought it was their duty to bring stability and prosperity out of the chaos because of Mexico's inability to control this rich land. The disarray came about, whites believed, because of the innate weaknesses in the Mexicans and Tejanos who populated the province. In general, the Americans of Texas saw Spanish speakers as "descendants of a tradition of paganism, depravity, and primitivism." This made them unworthy because their "habits clashed with American values, such as the work ethic." Further, it was not just their social, moral, and cerebral limitations that made them undeserving; their physical bodies were also inadequate and unhealthy. In one of the most shocking statements presented, De León quotes one source who argues that Mexican and Tejano bodies were so foul, filthy, and repulsive that not even worms or animals would consume their cadavers. Clearly, these are not people capable, intellectually or physically, of laying claim and developing a region with such potential.10

Many of these themes are likewise presented (through examining documents and attitudes from the early part of the 1900s) in a 1998 study by Mark C. Anderson. This essay reviews American newspaper articles dealing with the Mexican Revolution and that nation's internal turmoil, buttressing the argument of the northern country's (and its people's) intrinsic superiority. As Anderson states, "the United States press reflects ... the cultural flavors of imperialism ... [and] personified long-held American cultural visions of Mexico, historically redolent with ethnocentric constructions, racist reconstructions, and racist deconstructions." These issues could be lumped into three principal categorizations: backwardness, racial limitations, and moral decrepitude. The direct cause of all of the problems was the Mexicans' "mongrelized" heritage (the mestizo, the union of the Spanish and the Native American), both of which "had been cast as inferior in their own right, but also as parts of a whole that amount to less than the sum of their parts."11

A final illustration of the prevalence of such arguments is found in Natalia Molina's 2006 book *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*. Here the author tracks down documents generated by governmental and private health entities from the Los Angeles area and scours the materials for clues about how officials charged with protecting the public well-being and sanitation of the metropolis perceived the intellectual, moral, and physical characteristics of the burgeoning Spanish-surnamed population in their midst. Not surprisingly, the Mexicans of Los Angeles failed to measure up in all of the categories. Among the assessments of this populace over the last years of the 1800s and early part of the 1900s was an overabundance of condemnations arguing that these people were disease carriers (principally of tuberculosis), practiced unsanitary behaviors, needed to be taught proper hygiene, were genetically predisposed to work in "stoop" labor, and were generally ignorant
and “mentally inferior.” In summary, these three works provide a sense of how many whites identified the Spanish-speaking population that existed in parts of the Southwest. These people were perceived as weak and lacking in intelligence. Perhaps, given time and effort on the part of both groups, the Spanish-surnamed would benefit from learning some of the games and athletic events of their Yankee “betters,” but clearly the pupils faced an uphill battle in this undertaking.

An examination of journal articles and scholarly manuscripts (primarily master’s theses and doctoral dissertations) can be used in spotlighting some of the notions regarding the use of sport and athletic training by so-called progressive educators and certain government officials in regard to “improving” the circumstance of Spanish-surnamed children during the 1920s through 1930. What follows are a few examples.

Chavez’s call for more investments in athletics in order to “improve” the Spanish-speaking population (detailed at the start of this chapter) is also found in a 1925 University of Texas dissertation titled “Play as a Factor in the Education of Children,” by Florrie S. Dupre. Here, the author calls on the government of San Antonio to provide more parks and school facilities in order to counteract negative trends among local youths. While Dupre’s study makes a broad call for action (in other words, she urges the construction of play facilities and the creation of athletic programs for all of the children of the Alamo City), given the problems that are inherent among the Spanish-surnamed, it is not surprising that much of her work focuses on how the municipality can use sport in order to decrease the crime rate among adolescents of Mexican background (the “lower classes,” which she constantly refers to as “greasers”):

Until the last two years . . . children have been left to spend their leisure hours in idleness, in loafing, in wandering aimlessly about the streets, alleys and other undesirable districts . . . The consequence was that many boys and girls have fallen into practices and established habits which have brought about the low standard of moral and social life that is today prevalent among many of the younger people of San Antonio.13

José Alamillo’s research on the playgrounds of Los Angeles reveals that progressive do-gooders in that city had many of the same notions as those presented in Chavez’s and Dupre’s Texas-based studies. Specifically, the California city’s council began, as early as 1908, to provide facilities for the “Mexican” parts of town. The goal was to provide places to play and participate in sporting activities but also to “prevent juvenile delinquency, promote good health, encourage participation in civic life, and make good ‘American’ citizens out of the many immigrants.” While the goal seems noble, Alamillo notes that the arrangement of parks and playgrounds also had a more unpromising purpose: to keep such youths close to facilities
near their home neighborhoods. This process, he argues, had both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, since many Mexican and African American districts bordered, these parks often became the scenes of "fights, turf rivalry, and violence." However, by not providing broader opportunities for such youths in other parts of the metropolis, the city fostered the development of barrio-based athletic teams and leagues that helped to cultivate community pride and development.  

The works mentioned previously provide a discussion regarding Spanish-surnamed people and their hygiene, bodies, intellectual capabilities, and social practices as well as how sport and recreation might be used to improve on their faults. None of the projects, however, dealt directly with what the majority population thought about the athletic abilities (or inabilities) of "Latinos" or "Latin Americans". One direct study dealing with this topic appeared in 1922 in one of the most prominent scholarly journals on physical education, the American Physical Education Review. In three related articles, all titled "Racial Traits in Athletics," Elmer D. Mitchell makes "scientific observations" regarding the capabilities and limitations as athletes of 15 "races." He organizes the clans in descending order based on their representation in current-day American sports. Not surprisingly, the first piece dealt with the American, English, Irish, and German "races." These groups, Mitchell argued, were the most vigorous, competent, and powerful representatives of U.S. athletes. The four were the most physically gifted and intelligent men and women who consistently led teams to glory in both national and international competitions.  

Regarding the "second tier" of "races" (Scandinavians, Latins, Dutch, Poles, and "Negro"), the author details an ever-increasing litany of corporeal and psychological limitations that reduce the effectiveness of athletes. Within this section the French, Italians, and Spanish are combined into the designation of "Latin" (or, as he also refers to them, the "Southern races"). An abundance of problems limit this group's effectiveness in athletic competition. First, "the emotions, being more on the surface, make the Latin more lighthearted ... and, at the same time, more quickly aroused to temper and more fickle in his ardor." While this is a trait that all of the "Latin" share, Mitchell is quick to point out that the French, "being the northernmost of the Latin kin and having the larger share of Teuton blood, are naturally the most self-controlled." That meant, then, that the Spaniard was less capable as an athlete because he "tends to an indolent disposition. . . . He has less self-control than either the Frenchman or the Italian . . . [and he] is cruel, as is shown by the bull fights in Mexico and Spain."  

The concluding piece of Mitchell's intellectual tour de force focuses on groups providing the fewest number of competitors to 1920s American sports: Jews, Indians, Greeks, Orientals, South Americans, Slavs, and Finns. The "South American" apparently incorporates the most negative athletic traits of their progenitors, the Spaniards and the Native Americans. [It is
interesting to note that Mitchell overlooks the fact that some Latino athletes are of African ancestry.) It is worthwhile, we believe, to quote Mitchell at length to fully appreciate the overabundance of problems he and other educators and administrators like him found inherent in the athletes living and playing sports at all levels in the United States:

The South American has not the physique, environment, or disposition which makes for the champion athlete. In build he is of medium height and weight, and not rugged. The games he has borrowed from foreign countries are conducive to leisurely play. . . . [He] has inherited an undisciplined nature. The Indian in him chafes at discipline and sustained effort, while the Spanish half is proud to a fault. . . . [His] disposition makes team play difficult . . . the steady grind and the competition involved in winning a place on the Varsity has no attraction for them. Their sensitivity makes them rebel against the outspoken manner in which the American coach shouts out criticisms upon the coaching field. The Cubans have taken a liking to baseball, and some of them have become proficient. . . . In baseball they have shown themselves good throwers and fielders . . . but weak in batting.

Given such limitations, it is a wonder that Mitchell foresees any hope of athletic success for Spanish-speaking individuals. Still, not all is lost, because with time in the United States, Mexicans, Cubans, and other hot-blooded members of the "South American race" can learn to appreciate "good" sports as the "children of the above-mentioned immigrants seldom are adherents to the athletic exercise of the old country, that they become Americanized in American games just as in everything else." This process will, Mitchell hopes, make it possible for the Spanish-surnamed to leave behind their previous ties to "decadent nations" and such inappropriate diversions and games as "bullfights, cockfighting, [and] professional wrestling and the like." Statements such as those by Professor Mitchell clearly support one of our major themes: that the athletes mentioned in this chapter should be perceived not just as successful on-field competitors but rather as social pioneers whose talents directly challenged negative perceptions.

In summary, during the latter part of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, whites in the United States were bombarded with negative images of the physical and intellectual capabilities of the Spanish-surnamed people in their midst and most ultimately assumed that the sports of the Americans were simply too sophisticated, vigorous, and challenging for the feeble minds and bodies of Latinos.

In the sections that follow are the stories of athletes who directly contradicted such stereotypical notions in numerous sports and at levels ranging from the playground and community parks to the highest echelons
of professional sport. The level of coverage disproportionately focuses on two sports: baseball and boxing. From our research, it is clear that these were the two major sports in the U.S.-based communities and thus have been most thoroughly covered in both the academic and popular literature.

Baseball Craze

Between 1900 and 1930, the Latino presence in baseball became considerable. Spanish-surnamed fans of professional baseball saw their names with greater frequency in the major leagues and later the black leagues. And at the amateur level, Spanish speakers, particularly working-class Mexicans in the United States Southwest, engaged the game in rural and urban sites. Some took to baseball for its competitive value, while others saw it as a means for social and economic advancement. In all, as with mainstream Americans, the game absorbed the attention of its aficionados, and for academicians intrigued with the social dynamics of the game, the euphoria and participation in baseball carried with it varied interpretations. Moreover, for the Spanish surnamed, baseball illuminated issues of race, ethnicity, identity, and nationalism, as it did for many who experienced the game’s tremendous growth in the late 19th century.

By 1900, baseball’s popularity and significance had gravitated to the point where it reached into regions beyond its international borders. Moreover, scholars of the game, perhaps more than with any other sport in the United States, drew critical correlations to several late-19th-century developments, such as the rise of nationalism, westward expansion, industrialization, and global imperialism. The game’s aficionados not only saw its presence increase in this period but also promoted and romanticized the game as a symbol of American integrity and progress. Of course, in 1846, when Alexander Joy Cartwright, then a New York City engineer, introduced his rules in contrast to the loosely monitored format found in other areas and touted them as being “modern,” those affiliated with the game adopted the new format and anxiously promoted it particularly in urban America. In its antebellum life, men who played baseball largely came from the leisure class. But, during the Civil War, with evidence that those common foot soldiers from the Union and Confederacy played the game, baseball clearly had won over a mass audience.

After 1865, the game spread like wildfire. In fact, from the time of Reconstruction (roughly the late 1860s) until the early 1890s, baseball greatly benefited from the modern developments of increased technology and expanding national demographics. For instance, new lines of communication appeared within 10 years of the end of the war. In 1869, America saw the completion of its first transcontinental railroad system. Seven years later, Alexander Graham Bell displayed a functional telephone to the public, and within a short time businesses and mainstream society
had access to it. Baseball organizers did not miss a beat. In its very first year of existence, the Cincinnati Red Stockings baseball club, the game's first professional team, traveled across the country by railroad to compete in California and, in doing so, market the game. Moreover, as clubs competed in various regions, their legions of supporters followed the games through accelerated means to transmit scores and stories to the competitive newspaper industry. "Baseball news sold newspapers, and newspapers sold baseball," wrote historian Harold Seymour.20

Advanced methods in machinery also led to easier means of creating products that could be gobbled up at reachable prices from a larger number of consumers. For sport enthusiasts, better and cheaper equipment became available on the open market and through catalog merchandisers such as Montgomery Ward and Sears & Roebuck Company. Albert Spalding was a key player in this industry. A professional pitcher in the 1870s who played in the National League, Spalding in 1876 initiated his A.G. Spalding & Brothers sporting goods business that emerged as the era's largest outlet. Moreover, not only was he instrumental in the management of the professional game, he was also among the game's most ardent ambassadors of its image at home and abroad. Between 1888 and 1889, he took an all-star team on a global tour to promote his enterprises and the game.21

As the popularity of baseball grew, it also evoked a nationalistic spirit among a generation of Americans who matured in the years after the Civil War. Indeed, those who promoted the game saw in it a galvanizing effect in which they drew ties between the virtues of the sport and the national ideology. As early as 1860, lithographers Currier and Ives characterized associations between, in this case, politics and "the national game."22 As journalism increased its clout into mainstream society, writers, many of whom were caught up in the game's euphoria, sought to incorporate baseball's virtues into the American profile as a compelling symbol of democracy. For proponents of the game who adopted this position, their campaign was a timely one for three distinct reasons: First, large-scale industrialization created a clear urban proletariat working class, many of whom were either first- or second-generation immigrants who strove to assimilate in one manner or another with the mainstream. Second, as the nation grew geographically larger, there grew a concern that a sense of national unity could give way to regional loyalties and undermine a larger common bond. Third, as the nation drifted further away from the Civil War, there was no rally point that Americans might seize on for a sense and appreciation of national heritage. Indicative of this concern was the 1892 appearance of Francis Bellamy's "Pledge of Allegiance." In the eyes of many, baseball was the perfect tonic for promoting nationalism at home and abroad. Thus, as the eagle had been a longtime symbol of national strength and authority, baseball assumed the role as the nation's pastime.23
By 1900, baseball's position in America was strong. Profiled by many Americans in such a lofty manner, the game took on an identity that characterized the components of the national values. For instance, in an effort to rally the country in the midst of World War I, in 1917 Pennsylvania governor John K. Tener proclaimed baseball to be "the watchword of democracy." To be sure, while Tener's overly ambitious proclamation carried with it a sense of drama, those like the Pennsylvania governor saw in the game a sense of assimilating power, especially as the country experienced larger degrees of immigration since the 1880s. Proponents, for instance, argued that participation in the game could advance the amalgamation of social integration and, given its "American" traits, assimilation for new immigrants of various backgrounds, including the Spanish surnamed. "There is nothing which will help quicker and better amalgamate the foreign born, and those born of foreign parents in this country, than to give them a little good bringing up in the good old-fashioned game of Base Ball," argued Morgan Bulkeley, a one-time National League president. Others insisted that the game discriminated against no participant who carried with him the tools to compete in this Darwinistic ritual. Finally, "hitting a home run for God," as former major leaguer-turned-evangelist Billy Sunday trumpeted, resonated with those who envisioned an association between a sense of moral righteousness and the game itself. Muscular Christianity, as many called it, depicted the practice of athletic activity alongside "godliness" and, by extension, nationalism. No better portrait of these virtues could be found than in the fictional heroes of Horatio Alger, among the most popular writers of his day. His "rags to riches" scenarios came with the implicit message that hard work and perseverance were true American traits. "Victory," as such, could not be entirely gauged by the final score but by the mere satisfaction that a sincere effort alone was virtuous. Indeed, to echo a popular sentiment of that day, "It matters not whether you win or lose; it is how you play the game."26

For many Americans, the display of affection for the game was not mutually exclusive to their own burgeoning sense of nationalism. Some saw greater designs for the sport. As the country moved more aggressively to establish itself as a world power, Americans, many intrigued with Albert Spalding's recent ventures to advance baseball's reputation on a global basis, saw the potential to include the game within the nation's overall foreign interests. Indeed, the opportunity to exhibit the game in relationship to American virtues seemed ripe.

By 1890, proponents of free trade and military strength were already in the midst of a campaign to establish footholds in nations in the Caribbean and in other selected areas of the globe. In an era historians commonly refer to as one of neocolonialism, the United States saw itself in competition with the great powers of Europe that sought to tap into the valuable
resources in Latin America and Asia for financial leverage. To that end, American industrial magnates made huge investments into petroleum, mining, and railroads with designs to saturate the economic landscape of several Latin American countries, particularly those that were in and bordered the Caribbean region. To protect these interests, the American military kept a strategic presence in the region and exercised great latitude and little regard for the domestic policies in those lands that they occupied. Stability justified hegemony.

The implementation of cultural traits also accompanied America’s global expansionism. Though Manifest Destiny had ceased to be a domestic crusade by the end of the 19th century, there still were those who maintained that providence had dictated—indeed, appointed—Americans with the task of introducing “civilization” to those with whom they came into contact. The recipients of neocolonial power, in the quest for stability, seemed like suitable targets. For Americans, stability was defined not only by military occupation, which was temporary, but also by employing long-term strategies of foisting cultural principles on those occupied so that they could eventually assume the traits of the imperialists. In this manner, religious ministers, teachers, and other architects of the United States social milieu used various blueprints to Americanize the natives. For instance, in 1899 in Cuba, upon the defeat of the Spaniards, U.S. authorities brought in American school textbooks that were translated into Spanish. “Unquestionably our literature will promote their knowledge, improve their morals and give their people a new and better trend of thought,” wrote James Wilson, a provisional governor in Cuba during the United States occupation there.27 On other levels, too, Americans sought to temper or end Latino cultural practices. Bullfights and cockfighting were banned.28 Protestant ministers, moreover, campaigned for Catholic souls and temperance workers drifted into Cuban urban centers in hopes of curbing alcohol usage.

In this environment, baseball played a role. To be sure, Cubans had a working knowledge of the game that predated the Spanish-American War. Esteban Bellan, a Cuban student who attended Rose Hill College in New York in the mid-1860s, was among the first to learn the game and promote it to his compatriots. While in school, he played on the varsity baseball squad; in 1869, he joined the Troy Haymakers, a team that in 1871 established membership in the National Association, then identified as a major league. Thus, he became the first Spanish-surnamed player to reach that rank of professional baseball.29 After Bellan’s departure from the Haymakers and the United States in 1872, Vincent Nava was the next prominent Latino name to appear on a major league roster. A native of Mexico, Nava moved to the United States at a young age and established residency in San Francisco. Exhibiting a propensity for baseball, the young Mexican caught the attention of local clubs and debuted as a professional player in 1876. Six years later, the
"Spanish" catcher signed a contract to play for the Providence Grays of the National League and continued his career until 1887.30

When it came to Latin America and baseball, however, Cuba held the distinction of being what historian Rob Ruck called the game’s "epicenter" in that region.31 And the reason for this had as much to do with Cubans themselves as it had to do with American neocolonial programs. Esteban Bellan and others like him, for instance, returned to Cuba with vigor to continue their baseball activities and proceeded to initiate programs that led to teams and leagues. As in the United States, the game immediately attracted young Cubans, anxious to part ways with Spanish influence on them. In 1878, Emilio Sabourin organized the six-team Liga de Béisbol Profesional Cubana (the Cuban League of Professional Baseball). To be sure, Americans visiting Cuba before and during the Spanish-American War did not discourage these actions. In step with the desire to spread democracy, every effort was made to move Cubans in that direction. As such, before and shortly after the turn of the 19th century, American professional players and even entire teams ventured into Cuba for competition and financial gain. The Cuban appetite for the game was such that it led one visitor to report that islanders were “stark raving dottily crazy over baseball.”32

From Cuba, baseball easily reached the shores of other regions and nations adjacent to the Caribbean. Like the disciples of a religion, Cuban baseball aficionados encouraged rivalries with other Latin nations. By the end of the 19th century, baseball had established a presence in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Venezuela, and selected Central American areas. Moreover, by no coincidence, United States military and diplomatic personnel and other Americans who had extended stays in Latin America encouraged and initiated contests with the locals. Of course, the U.S. barnstorming professional teams and players were active ambassadors of the game.

By 1910, the Caribbean was a hotbed of baseball activity, particularly during the winter. Teams like the Cincinnati Reds, Detroit Tigers, and New York Giants brought with them players like Ty Cobb and Christy Mathewson to compete in the region. But African American players, too, descended on the ball fields of the regions. There, like the white players, they too could earn extra money and, more important, play baseball outside of the shadow of the racism that haunted them in the United States. In Latin America, black players could also gauge their skills against the white U.S. players.33

But Latinos, too, had standout players by then. By the early 20th century, the national pastime in the United States held a similar status in the Caribbean. The Liga de Béisbol Profesional Cubana entered its 22nd year and players like Wenceslao Gálvez y Delmonte and Adolfo Luján were to Cuban baseball fans as Cobb and Mathewson were to fans in the
United States. As baseball entered the new century, it had evolved into an international, transnational, and biracial game. And, in many respects, the game in Latin America was more democratic than it was inside the so-called land of the free.

As U.S. baseball organizers touted the sport as one that provided a level playing field for combatants, in the wake of a new national spirit, Cubans and Puerto Ricans also saw the game as a tool by which they could contest their oppressors. Cuba assumed the designation as a protectorate and Puerto Rico a commonwealth after the 1898 Spanish-American War not by choice but by force. As U.S. officials introduced with their “liberation” aggressive measures to change large aspects of policy and culture in the Caribbean, many Cubans and Puerto Ricans could see little of the democracy that the Americans had so strongly marketed. Moreover, American actions seemed to play out in a manner that Cuban patriot José Martí had forewarned before his death at the hand of the Spaniards in 1895: “Once the United States is in Cuba, who will get it out?” Needless to say, American aims in the region were heavily weighted on economic and military objectives and less on advancing U.S. culture for culture’s sake. Baseball for many in Cuba and Puerto Rico was one of the few means by which they could challenge their occupiers.

While neither Puerto Ricans nor Cubans ever mounted an organized or aggressive resistance, victories on the baseball diamond carried with them undertones of national pride. In recollection of his own nation’s trepidations of the American presence there, Juan Bosch, one-time president of the Dominican Republic, said, “[Baseball] games manifested a form of the people’s distaste of the occupation. They were a repudiation of it.” Though the Dominican president’s comments came in the mid-1960s, others of an earlier era, like Dominican Manuel Joaquín Báez Vargas in 1916, observed that “these [baseball] games with North American sailors and marines were very important. There was a certain kind of patriotic enthusiasm in beating them.”

The development of baseball in Latin America also spawned the interests of blue chip players from there who wanted to expand their competitive level beyond their homelands. Major league coaches and owners were also intrigued by the stories that came to them of Latin American players and envisioned the potential for recruitment of cheap talent. After Bellan’s and Nava’s brief tenures in the 1880s, only Luis Castro, a Colombian who played with the Philadelphia Athletics in 1902, played in the big leagues. And, as with his predecessors, his stay was brief. Not until 1911 did baseball fans in the United States begin to see Spanish-surnamed players with some regularity. Rafael Almeida from Havana and Armando Marsans from Matanzas in Cuba signed on to play for the Cincinnati Reds. Interestingly, Marsans came onboard chiefly to serve as an interpreter for Almeida. However, Marsans more than held his own at the major league level
and remained there for an eight-year career while Almeida lasted only two seasons.

Adolfo Luque, a pitcher from Cuba, was perhaps the most prominent of the early players from Latin America. Luque, who came armed with a highly touted curveball, had a memorable 20-year stay at the major league level. Originally from Havana and in the majors from 1914 to 1935, Luque had a record of 194 wins and 179 defeats. Moreover, he was the first Latin American to play in the World Series when he competed with the 1919 Cincinnati Reds against the infamous “Black” Sox. In 1933, as a member of the New York Giants, the “Pride of Havana” won one game in that World Series. Luque’s best year came in 1923 when he logged a 27-8 record and a 1.93 earned run average. The Sporting News referred to Luque as “Cuba’s greatest gift to our national game.”

To Cubans, as scholar Roberto González Echevarría claims, Luque was seemingly "celebrated for having created Cuba in the consciousness of the United States, and feted for defending the fatherland, as if he had been a soldier in battle." Upon completion of his playing career, the right-hander returned to Cuba and became a successful manager in the winter leagues.

Two basic reasons account for the increased number of Latin American ballplayers, almost entirely made up of Cubans, who joined the majors before World War II. First, there was word of mouth from seasoned major leaguers who played winter baseball in the Caribbean; second, the impact of the Great Depression led owners such as Clark Griffith to recruit cheap
talent. To the former, as mentioned previously, after 1900 both major league teams and individual players looking to make extra money routinely competed in Latin America. Doing so exposed them directly to the local talent they might have otherwise overlooked. Naturally, upon their return to the United States, the American players spoke of their experiences to teammates and coaches and of the talent they encountered. In 1922, after having faced pitcher José Méndez and slugger Cristobal Torrienti, two black players in Cuba, Babe Ruth reportedly commented, "Tell Torrienti and Méndez that if they could play with me in the major leagues, we would win the pennant in July, and go fishing for the rest of the season."39

Stories like these did not escape the attention of Clark Griffith, who, long before Ruth's experience, knew of the potential of Latino skill on the diamond. As manager of the Cincinnati Reds, he initiated a process that led to the recruitment of such players onto his squad. Later, when he was the owner of the Washington Senators, his efforts to tap this new talent pool became even more ambitious. In 1911 with the Reds, Griffith convinced management to sign two Cuban players, Rafael Almeida and Armando Marsans. As noted previously, Marsans was the better of the two and enjoyed a respectable career. Griffith's intrigue with such players continued and by the time he assumed ownership of the Washington Senators, his interest grew, particularly in the wake of the Great Depression and his connection to Joe Cambria (which is detailed in chapter 4).

Not all ball players who came to the United States to play professional baseball entered the major leagues. Considerably more played in the Negro Leagues before 1930 than did those who were in the major leagues. While the major league color barrier at times was ambiguous, black baseball was a reasonable option for many young men who hoped to play ball in the United States. Competing side by side with blacks, of course, was not an unusual position for many of the Spanish-surnamed players. Baseball in Latin America was often a multicultural activity. Moreover, young Spanish speakers often idolized the many black ballplayers who competed with distinction in their countries. Thus, to play black baseball in the United States, even for Latinos whose color was ambiguous, was not seen in negative terms. Indeed, some of Latin America's greatest stars played in the Negro Leagues. From 1908 to 1926 pitching great José Méndez, Cuba's "Black Diamond," played almost his entire career with black clubs; Cristobal Torrienti played from 1914 to 1932; and Martin Dihigo, perhaps the greatest of all Latin American players, also played in the Negro Leagues from 1923 to 1945. Interestingly, some African Americans saw the possibilities that successful light-complexioned Spanish speakers, upon landing contracts with major league teams, could help to break down the racial color barrier. As reported by Donn Rogosin, after the entry of Rafael Almeida and Armando Marsans to the Cincinnati Reds, Booker T. Washington wrote, "With the admission of Cubans of a darker hue in the two big leagues it
would be easy for colored players who are citizens of this country to get into fast company."

Black baseball in the United States was, of course, a product of racial discrimination. And all those who donned the uniforms of the clubs experienced the trauma associated with that practice. Some stars, such as Perucho Cepeda, opted not to play ball in the United States. For Latinos, the whole concept of racial discrimination as practiced in the United States was strange. To be denied access to such social accommodations as restaurants or hotels based solely on skin color was not a state of affairs that Spanish-surnamed blacks or mulattos found attractive. Luis Tiant Sr., whose son went on to great fame in the major leagues, "drilled into his son the memories of horrendous, grueling bus trips, and unaccustomed segregation," said historian Donn Rogosin.

In the years before the Great Depression, the game was also established in the community at the amateur level, particularly in the U.S. Southwest. As with the professional game, baseball's origins in this region had several roots. Developments in the era of Porfirio Díaz, for instance, played significant roles that advanced the game first in Mexico proper and later to its northern frontier. With an emphasis on modernizing the country, the Díaz administration adopted measures in order to draw the fiscal attention of foreign industrialists so that they might invest heavily in Mexican products and resources. To achieve its goals, the government sought ways to create greater productivity from its laborers. In this respect, baseball (which had been introduced to the Yucatán by Cubans), with its emphasis on team play, was a component in the goals of the administration and in step with the current trend towards modernism. Though the game caught hold among the elites, a decade later in the 1890s its popularity among the urban and rural proletariats soared. As Mexican industry grew in the country's northern periphery, laborers who had engaged the game in the south in search of employment migrated with the help of the railroad and eventually sought to satisfy their baseball appetites once they settled in their new environs. Many of these individuals (and later, their families) formed the core of the immigrant generation of Mexicans who came to work in the United States during the years of the Revolution and before the start of the Great Depression.

Of course, as the region near the border on the United States side saw an increase in agricultural productivity followed by higher demographic numbers, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the game accompanied these developments. By 1900, there already existed a transcontinental railroad on the southern periphery of the nation. Plus, baseball by the end of the 19th century had become a national phenomenon. As early as 1884, the game already had caught the attention of the citizens of Laredo. From there, it is conceivable that baseball breached Mexican territory from the United States. As sociologist Alan Klein points out, "If baseball was practiced in
the Laredo area in the early 1880s, it is reasonable to assume that it was played in Nuevo Laredo as well. By 1900, baseball's gravitation to the borderlands of the American southwest was complete. All along the international border from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific coast area, local newspapers routinely reported game results. Fourth of July tournaments were common and "nines" in the Texas area were reported in such towns as Laredo, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi.

Noe Torres has contributed two studies that shed further light on the role of professional, semiprofessional, and community baseball in the extreme southern section of the Lone Star State. In his 2005 and 2006 respective works Ghost Leagues: A History of Minor League Baseball in South Texas and Baseball's First Mexican-American Star: The Amazing Story of Leo Najo, Torres documents the vibrancy and significance of baseball to the communities in this region of Texas in the early decades of the 20th century. Beginning with the arrival of American soldiers in the late 1840s and railroads during the 1900s, the area's residents, predominantly Texans of Mexican descent, were enthralled by the national pastime. As the locality's connections to the rest of the nation improved, entrepreneurs brought low-level (class D) professional baseball and even some major league teams for spring training in 1920 to the area. Over the first four decades of the 1900s, through a series of fits and starts, the Rio Grande Valley was home to several leagues: the Southwest Texas League (1910-1911), the Gulf Coast League (1926), the Texas Valley League (1927-1928), the Rio Grande Valley League (1931), and another version of the Texas Valley League (1938). Unfortunately, given the ebb and flow of the valley's economics, teams and circuits often came and went in rapid succession. Still, local fans, both white and Spanish surnamed, enjoyed the sport, rooted for local squads, and cheered the players, particularly the greatest local professional of the era, Mexican-born but valley-raised Leonardo Alanis.

"Najo," as he was affectionately called, came to the United States in 1909, moving into a house in the border town of Mission with his mother. During his childhood he came to love baseball and became an accomplished hitter and fielder. As Torres argues, since "there were no broadcasts of any kind and professional baseball was . . . played in cities far away from their homes, South Texas residents expressed their love of the sport by . . . playing the game in whatever venues were available locally." By his middle teens, Najo (who never attended high school) was a star in the most successful of the local semiprofessional teams, the Mission Treinta Treinta (the 30-30 Rifles) until 1923. He also took advantage of an opportunity to play for pay across the Rio Grande, toiling for various squads in Mexico until 1926. It was during this time that Alanis came to the attention of the Texas League's San Antonio Bears (who were struggling both in the field and at the gate). Although hesitant at first to bring on a "Mexican," the Bears' owner eventually signed Najo, and this commenced nearly two
decades of minor league wanderlust that took Alanis from South Texas
to Oklahoma, Nebraska, and other stops throughout the Midwest. It also
included a tryout with the 1926 Chicago White Sox.

In late December 1925 the White Sox claimed Najo from the Bears and
the young Mexicano arrived in Shreveport, Louisiana, in February of the
following year in order to compete for an outfield position on a major league
roster. From the beginning, the Windy City media could not help but use
crude stereotypes in describing the Chisox’s newest athlete. “Lee Najo is
a Mexican Indian from Texas. That should give him a decided advantage
over ordinary athletes. He’s an expert foot runner. When a boy on the
plains, he loped after jack rabbits. When he steals a base, he looks like a
fleeting shadow.”49 Although newspaper writers looked down on Alanis
because of his ethnicity, he quickly proved himself on the field, having
a fine spring training. Unfortunately, he did not make the trip north and
was ultimately reassigned to the Bears.

The exact reason behind Najo’s release by Chicago has been
the subject of much speculation over the years. Some observers
have suggested that San Antonio negotiated with the White Sox
to get Leo back in the Alamo City, where his immense popular-
ity among Hispanics translated into excellent gate receipts for the
team. [Others argue that] Najo was expected to make the trip . . . for
the start of the season, but his tremendous gate appeal . . . set into
motion a furious effort by the Bears’ management to convince
the White Sox that they could hold off on adding Najo to their
full-time roster for at least one more year. Apparently, White
Sox team officials were persuaded . . . to allow San Antonio to
keep Najo for one more year before they moved him up to the
big leagues for good . . . barring any unforeseen injuries.50

Tragically, Najo never made an appearance in a regular-season major
league game because he broke his leg below the knee in a game on July
6, 1926, and never again tried out with a big league club. Najo continued
to play and eventually managed, primarily in and around South Texas,
until 1950. Between 1933 and 1937 he directed the fortunes of the 30-30s;
later, although his skills had begun to decline, he continued to play and
manage in the area’s various minor leagues and in northern Mexico. As
he approached his later years, Mission residents honored him by naming
the local high school baseball field in his honor. Leonardo “Najo” Alanis
passed away in 1978.51

Further out west, the booming citrus industry also helped to spawn the
game in Southern California. “U.S. companies subsidized baseball teams
on both sides of the Rio Grande to increase worker productivity and foster
company loyalty,” wrote historian José Alamillo.52 In that respect, the Sunk-
ist Growers spearheaded the movement to introduce baseball programs
into their realms. As reported by Alamillo, G.B. Hodgkin, the director of
Sunkist’s industrial relations department during World War I, wrote, “In order to produce the desired [Mexican] workers, they have to become a member of a local society or baseball team . . . to increase their physical and mental capacity for doing more work.” To that end, the company even employed Keith Spalding, son of A.G. Spalding, among the founders of the National League and a world emissary of the game, to include baseball facilities in his development of a company community in a ranch site in the Ventura community town of Fillmore, California.

To be sure, between 1900 and 1930, the national pastime had captivated the Mexican American barrios and colonias even outside of the realm of the company towns. A tremendous interest in sport and competition in general provided the stimulus for the baseball activities. “Several youthful companions, amateur enthusiasts of ‘baseball,’ have begun practicing this lovely sport in the lawn tennis patio of the club,” reported El Heraldo in 1916 about the Mexican elite who had recently arrived in Los Angeles. But, as historian Douglas Monroy uncovered, those who presented the most competitive games came out of the working class. With the increase of Mexican migration into the United States, in part due to the vicious civil war that claimed nearly one million Mexican lives, by the mid- to late 1920s, several southwestern cities, such as San Antonio, El Paso, and Los Angeles, grew in population. “By 1925 Los Angeles had a larger Mexican population than any city in Mexico except the national capital,” observed Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Ribera.

In the Mexican barrio of East Los Angeles, baseball thrived. Mexican small business owners, with some money to spend, sponsored several teams that competed against each other and clubs outside of their enclave. Such names as El Paso Shoe Store, the El Porvenir Grocery, and the Ortiz New Fords were popular among Mexicans in that area and made for good advertisement for the sponsoring businesses. They provided not only an avenue of respect and social position for those who wore their uniforms but also a sense of Mexican identity to the mainstream society that surrounded them. Douglas Monroy argues that baseball in the barrios in this era “was one way the various people from south of the border forged an identity as Mexicans, a way for Mexicans to garner respect in the eyes of the americanos, and a public reinforcement of the traditional manly family values of forceful, dynamic activities.”

As baseball’s life was vibrant in the Mexican urban and rural communities, the game also helped people to network with each other on both sides of the border. In the years preceding the Great Depression, athletic clubs were abundant within Mexican and other ethnic immigrant enclaves. These clubs were, in fact, social centers akin to the mutual aid organizations that existed in the late 19th-century communities. The athletic clubs often drew the attention and support of local businesses, Spanish-language press, the Catholic Church, and labor unions. These sporting networks established during away games and tournament matches
became important for community organizing and labor struggles," wrote José Alamillo. Moreover, in their support for baseball, leaders in these clubs often arranged games against similar organizations in other regional locales as well as against clubs from Mexico. As a result, players not only competed against each other, but families came together as teams often caravanned to games en masse.

A similar set of events and characteristics existed among "Latinos" [Cuban, Spanish, Italian] who toiled in the cigar-making industry headquartered in Ybor City and West Tampa, Florida. There, youths played baseball for the love of the game, for the pride of their neighborhood and ethnic club, and for an opportunity to earn some pay in local circuits (primarily in the Florida State League) and, in a very few cases, at the major league level. One such player, who became a local legend during the first decades of the 1900s, was Alfonso (Al) Ramon Lopez.

The parents of "El Señor" [which translates to "the gentleman"] migrated to Cuba from Spain during the 1890s and then to Tampa in 1906; the future major leaguer, the family's eighth child, arrived in 1908. The young Lopez was part of a community that changed dramatically between the turn of the 20th century and the early 1920s in regard to athletics. As Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta have noted, by this time a wide range of sporting activities were sponsored by mutual aid societies and ethnic businesses; also, as the broader community became better off economically, a greater emphasis on education emerged (which meant neighborhood boys began playing for local schools). This meant that the "Latinos . . . [now had] a socially approved context for athletic competition . . . at the
same time [this] accelerated upward mobility and the integration of Ybor City youths into mainstream Tampa."60

In this milieu, a young man with talent was bound to get noticed, and Lopez got his chance to leave behind the factories starting in 1924 when he signed with the Class D Tampa Smokers.61 As happened with the parents of many immigrant youths in the early 20th century, Lopez's parents were not certain about the potential for their son making a living in baseball. "Lopez's parents . . . did not object to his playing . . . since they were only moderately well off and had little hope of his attending college or even progressing further in high school. However, they did tell him that if he did not make it in baseball, he would have to get a job."62 During his time with the Smokers, not surprisingly, many of the squad's games took place in segregated towns all throughout the state of Florida. At such events, it was not uncommon to hear derogatory language from the crowd directed at Lopez and his two Cuban teammates (Oscar Estrada and Cesare Alvarez) in 1925. "People would call me a 'Cuban Nigger' or something like that, and I'm not even Cuban.' In retrospect . . . 'I treated everybody like I wanted to be treated . . . I never had this minority thing handicap me in any way. I'm Spanish and proud of it.'"63

After his time with the Smokers, Lopez moved on to Jacksonville and then Macon before being called up by the Brooklyn Dodgers (also known as the Robins at that time) for the last few weeks of the 1928 season. He returned to the minors in 1929 with the Atlanta Crackers, moving up to the majors permanently at the start of the 1930 campaign. Lopez caught for Brooklyn until 1935 and also played for the Braves (1936-1940; for a brief time during those years the team was known as the Bees), the Pirates (1940-1946), and the Indians (1947). The following season, he began a successful stint as a minor league manager (with Indianapolis of the American Association, a team affiliated with the Pirates). Lopez became a manager for the Cleveland Indians in 1950, one of the first Latinos to pilot a major league club.64

Al Lopez's impact on his community was clear to many in the Tampa area and buttresses key contentions raised throughout this work. The legendary El Señor provided the young men in Ybor City with a role model of someone who did not allow racist remarks and assumptions to keep him from accomplishing goals. Further, Lopez's success in the majors as player and manager "fostered a sense of pride among local Latins who vicariously shared his success" and who then carried that same sense of dignity and self-respect into other parts of day-to-day experience.65 As Ferdie Pacheco argued in his memoir Ybor City Chronicles, "Sports . . . were an integral part of everyday life. We rooted for the teams that had Ybor City boys playing for them. The Brooklyn Dodgers were our team because Al Lopez caught for them. . . . Even today he is spoken of with reverence."66

By 1930, baseball's Latino presence, at both the professional and amateur levels, was considerable. The sport was as meaningful to them as it was
to mainstream Americans. Moreover, on several fronts, Spanish-surnamed players associated baseball with a sense of manliness and national and ethnic identity. Professionals played it to advance themselves socially and financially. Amateurs used it to strengthen family and community kinships. In the major leagues, the black leagues, in public parks across the Southwest, and in company lots, Latinos had placed their undeniable stamp on baseball’s heritage.

**Rise of American Football**

The rise of American football has been well documented. In addition to the generic coverage regarding the game’s dissemination, a few scholars, chief among them Gerald R. Gems, have written about how football caught on with various ethnic groups throughout the United States (starting with Native Americans and eastern Europeans in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio) during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As many of the disciples of the legendary Walter Camp left New Haven, Connecticut, the graduates took with them a passion for this rough-and-tumble sport, which had initially been played primarily by elite young men, to all sections of the nation, including locales with large numbers of Spanish-surnamed people.

While football was not unknown in Texas, the arrival of one Yale graduate, James Perkins Richardson (in 1892), ushered in gridiron battles to the state. Richardson’s first stop was in the seaport city of Galveston as a teacher at Ball High School, where he quickly challenged another Ivy Leaguer, John Sealy from Princeton, who had established a team of his own, the Galveston Rugbys (made up of recent college graduates and local businessmen). The first game between the sides took place on Christmas Eve of 1892. Over the next decade, Sealy and his athletes played against squads (both club and high school) in Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio. By 1900, secondary schools in Dallas and Houston were competing against each other in the increasingly popular sport.

In the parts of Texas where Mexican Americans predominated, football also became popular by the turn of the century: High school matches took place in El Paso by 1895, in Laredo by the early 1900s, and in the Rio Grande Valley by 1911. Because of the deplorable economic circumstances and outright educational discrimination that many Spanish speakers endured, however, most young men did not make it past the elementary grades and did not play high school football. For example, one of the schools with the longest history of playing football in the Rio Grande Valley is Edinburg High School. That team, the Bobcats, did not include a Spanish-surnamed player until 1927, when local legend Amador Rodriguez played for the squad. Still, by 1925, there was sufficient interest in high school football among people of Mexican background in nearby
Brownsville to lead poet Juan E. Coto to proclaim love for the game (in Spanish, no less) and his unending support for a local team:

Foot-ball
Foot-ball, foot-ball, foot-ball . . .
Ha humedecido el prado con su azul mañana,
y en la calida hora rie la juventud . . .
Foot-ball, dicen los coros, y yo digo foot-ball!
Arde la sangre pura de varones perfectos,
que desnudan sus cuerpos rosado en el sol.
Avanza la victoria del "match" para los blancos.
Todos son razonables los que en mi equipo estan!
El goce ahoga el claro grito de mi garganta,
y el poeta no juega . . . en su silencio, canta:
Allá van los burritos del dulce Francis Jammes?1
Foot-ball
Foot-ball, foot-ball, foot-ball . . .
The blue morning has moistened the meadow,
and in that warm hour youth smiles . . .
Foot-ball, cries out the chorus, and I say foot-ball!
The blood of the perfect young men burns,
as they expose their flesh to the sun.
Victory in the 'match' advances for the whites.
All who root for our team are sensible!
Sheer joy drowns out the clear shout from my throat,
and the poet who does not play . . . in his silence, sings:
"There go the donkeys of sweet Francis Jammes [school]!"

By the latter part of the 1920s and early 1930s, however, Amador Rodriguez was joined by a few other Mexican Americans who began to make their mark on the sport in southern Texas.72 One particularly notable example was a jugador named Everardo Carlos (E.C.) Lerma.

E.C. Lerma was born in the small South Texas town of Bishop in 1915, son of immigrants from Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico. By the time he was eight, he had lost both of his parents and was being raised by his 10 brothers and sisters. As a group, the siblings decided that they would sacrifice and work in order to help the young Lerma make it through school. Although he grew up poor and attended segregated schools, E.C. became, like so many other Texans, captivated by the spectacle of gridiron battles on Friday nights in the fall. Eventually, he became one of the first Spanish-surnamed
youths to play football at Kingsville High School. He met resistance from some of his teammates who did not want to play with a “Mexican,” but he persevered and eventually earned all-district honors in 1933, his senior year. Upon completing high school, he enrolled in the local college, Texas A&I, which is now known as Texas A&M University at Kingsville. The story of Everardo Carlos Lerma demonstrates how individual athletes used sport to challenge assumptions about both the intellectual and physical capabilities of the Spanish-surnamed population of the United States. The rest of his story is detailed in subsequent chapters.

In the neighboring state of New Mexico, the game of football became well established at around the same time as in Texas: Seven public high schools played a fairly regular schedule as early as 1900. In the same year that New Mexico achieved statehood (1912), the Roswell and Albuquerque sides competed for the first state title. Similar to the pattern present in Texas, according to the research of amateur historian Dan Ford, there were not large numbers of Spanish-surnamed young men playing football before the mid-1920s. Two of the earliest individuals Ford mentions are the Hernandez brothers, Louis (who also played for the University of New Mexico) and Walter. Like E.C. Lerma, the two men also had long and distinguished careers as coaches. Another from this era who followed this career path was Abbie Paiz, a quarterback at Albuquerque High School who played for the Bulldogs in the late 1920s and early 1930s and then moved on to play with his local university, helping lead the Lobos to “the most successful era in school history.” Upon graduation, Paiz became a legendary head coach at Belen High School, retiring in 1971.

The material regarding Latino high school footballers in Ybor City is not extensive, though Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta do note that the athletes who played were held in high regard by the community. “Our folk heroes were the fellows who wore red-letter sweaters,” argued Ferdie Pacheco. And their numbers continued to increase after 1920. Hillsborough High School featured two “Latinos” on its 1920 team, but the number had increased to 14 players by just five years later. One of these was Joseph “Big Joe” Domingo, “one of the best fullbacks that Hillsborough has ever produced, perhaps All-state.” Over the next two decades, “Latinos” made up at least one-half of the starting lineups for Hillsborough High. The authors argue that the increasing number of Latino athletes on the rosters of Ybor City area schools indicated that competition on the field of athletic battle ultimately “transported Latins away from the sheltered immigrant neighborhood and into rival arenas . . . [and these] youths came to prefer the we-ness of athletic competition to the brotherhood of doctrines espoused by the defeated left.”

Since the overwhelming majority of Spanish-surnamed individuals (particularly Mexican Americans) living in the United States during the first half of the 20th century did not graduate from high school, it is not
surprising to note that the number of such who played collegiate and professional football during these years is quite limited. Still, a few managed to overcome stereotypes of intellectual and corporeal inferiority in order to don the jerseys of a few universities and even to compete in the National Football League. Although there are a few sources by other writers, the overwhelming majority of the information on this topic can be credited to the diligence of Mario Longoria, and the results can be found in his excellent book *Athletes Remembered: Mexicano/Latino Professional Football Players, 1929-1970*.

Among the first Spanish-surnamed athletes to participate in collegiate football in the United States were the Molinet brothers (Joaquin and Ignacio) who hailed from Cuba and played at Cornell during the 1920s. The two distinguished themselves on the Ivy League gridiron: Joaquin eventually was inducted into the Cornell Athletic Hall of fame and his younger brother became the first Latino ever to play in the NFL with the Frankford Yellowjackets in 1927. Two other siblings, the Rodriguez brothers (originally from Spain), also played collegiate football, the elder Jesse with Salem College in West Virginia (starting in 1925) and brother Kelly at West Virginia Wesleyan (starting in 1926). Both also played in the

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**Ignacio Molinet**

Ignacio Molinet is now acknowledged as the first Latino ever to don a helmet in the National Football League, having played with the Frankford Yellowjackets in 1927. While his professional career was brief, Molinet is now accorded his rightful place in the annals of America's favorite sport league.

"Molly" Molinet was born in 1904 in Chaparra, Oriente Province, Cuba. His parents hailed from Spain, and family members believe their ancestors had lived in France. The clan was financially prosperous in Cuba, which gave Ignacio and his brother Joaquin the prized opportunity of a U.S.-based education (both attended, graduated, and played collegiate sports for Cornell).

The path that led to Ignacio's playing professionally was a tragic one: Both parents died and he decided to withdraw from college. Given his success on the gridiron, however, he was contacted by the Yellowjackets and offered a contract. His lone campaign in Frankford was not noteworthy; Molinet rushed for 75 yards and scored one touchdown. After this experience, he returned to Cornell and earned an engineering degree. He then spent the majority of his working life with Eastman Kodak and died in 1976 at the age of 72.
NFL, Jesse with the Buffalo Bison in 1929 and Kelly with the Frankford Yellowjackets and the Minneapolis Redjackets in 1930.

By 1930, then, the Latino presence in football, at the amateur level and to a lesser degree at the professional level, was still relatively small but this rough-and-tumble game was just as meaningful to minority communities in various parts of the nation as it was to the majority population. Spanish-surnamed players associated the game with a sense of manliness and, perhaps more important, with their ethnic identity and as a way to challenge negative perceptions of their intellectual and physical abilities.

**Marginal Sport**

**Claiming Its Place in Barrio Life**

For more than a century, soccer has existed on the fringes of American sport. The marginalization of soccer has been attributed to its "foreign" image compared to the more American connotations of baseball, basketball, and football. Even the sport’s name was uncertain: Soccer was referred to as football before 1900. When Ivy League colleges replaced soccer with rugby (later transformed into American football) in the early 1870s, the game was kept alive in working-class neighborhoods of urban America. But immigrants from Europe who arrived at the turn of the century contributed to soccer’s steady growth. They formed soccer clubs in the northeastern part of the United States and in selected cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. In 1908 soccer became part of the Olympic movement and five years later formed its first national governing body, the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) and an official national championship tournament (known as the National Challenge Cup). The establishment of the first American Soccer League in 1921 spurred interest in creating a national team for international competition. In 1930 the United States played in its first World Cup in Uruguay.76 Despite receiving more national and international recognition after 1900, U.S. soccer remained a mostly amateur and semiprofessional sport with a regional and local focus.

Unlike other sports that rely on a high school and college pipeline, soccer relied primarily on a club system for its growth and development. Immigrants from Europe and Latin America fueled this growth by forming soccer clubs upon arrival.77 These soccer clubs were more than a weekend diversion; rather, they resembled multipurpose social clubs that helped immigrants adjust to American society. Immigrant soccer players expressed their ethnic and national pride through their jersey colors and team names. In fact, one study found that ethnic soccer clubs actually delayed immigrant assimilation into American society.78 Simultaneously, the ethnic association with soccer clubs hindered soccer’s development as an "American" sport.
Soccer clubs were usually founded as extensions of ethnic clubs, sport clubs, or mutual-aid societies. One of the earliest Latino soccer clubs was Hispano Americana F.C., founded in the early 1920s by members of Asociación Deportiva Hispano Americana (ADHA). ADHA was the largest sport club in Los Angeles financed by the city’s Spanish language newspaper, La Opinión, and the Alianza Hispano Americana (AHA), the largest and most prominent Mexican American mutual aid association in the Southwest. José Torres, ADHA treasurer and brother of Spain’s consul general in Los Angeles, organized Hispano Americana in 1921. As the team captain and goalkeeper, Torres insisted that the team include different Latin American nationalities in order to be truly competitive against more established European American soccer clubs. The pan-Latino label reflected the diversity of players from Spain, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina. Hispano Americana competed in the Greater Los Angeles Soccer League and won the California Soccer League title during the 1928-1929 season. The team played matches against ethnic-based teams like Turnverein Germania, Italy F.C., Sons of St. George, and Vikings A.C. The matches were held at Loyola Soccer Field (owned by Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles). Without the financial sponsorship of ADHA, Hispano-Americana could not afford the travel costs, uniforms, and high fees to play at this facility. The team lasted until 1933 when, after losing their financial sponsor, the economic depression forced players to quit or join other teams with more secure funding.

Another Latino soccer club that emerged during the 1920s was Brooklyn Hispano F.C. This soccer club was based in Brooklyn, New York, and was the founding member of the second American Soccer League. Unlike the first league that went out of business in 1931, the second league began in 1933 as a semi-professional league with ethnically oriented teams, many that lasted until the early 1980s. Brooklyn Hispano played home games at Starlight Park in the Bronx, attracting spectators from all over New York City. The Spanish language press kept track of Hispano matches and players. At the beginning of each soccer season, Brooklyn Hispano organized a fundraiser dance featuring Latin music bands and a raffle for free season tickets. Although the team roster featured players from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Spain, the New York Times referred to all as “Spanish-Americans.” After a hard-fought match against the Brooklyn Wanderers, one local sports journalist wrote, “While the Spanish-Americans put up a plucky fight, they had to yield to the superior prowess of the American leaguers.”

The pan-Latino orientation of Hispano Americana and Brooklyn Hispano reflected not only the game’s widespread appeal throughout Latin America but also the difficulty of securing sponsorship solely from one ethnic group. Still, members of San Antonio’s Mexican community took up the challenge and organized their own soccer club. On September 5, 1925, Coach Miguel de Uranga announced the formation of Mexico Football
Club, inviting new members to join by attending evening practices at Van Daele Stadium’s soccer field. Because of the large number who showed up, Coach Uranga formed two teams (A and B) that would alternate matches. Mexico F.C. was also the founding member of the San Antonio Soccer League that included International, San Juan Seminary, West Texas Military Academy, Rangers, and Fort Sam Houston. The team’s name and red, green, and white colors reflected national pride in all things Mexican. Coach Uranga acknowledged his team’s patriotism since “Mexico Football Club was formed precisely for Mexicans to compete for the city championship.” Patriotic fervor was at its highest when Mexico F.C. played against the soldier players of Fort Sam Houston. In one particularly exciting match, with three minutes remaining, Fort Sam Houston tied the game, but according to La Prensa, it was Mexico F.C.’s “Latin fury that dominated the cold Anglo Saxon blood.”

Since the demise of Hispano Americana, efforts to revive soccer in Los Angeles proved difficult, especially because soccer competed with the more popular sports of baseball and boxing. Nevertheless, a La Opinión sports writer suggested that “Los Angeles is big enough to include many sports. While it is true that Mexicans have not shown interest in soccer, they are a minority and despite the skepticism of our countrymen other nationalities have formed their own teams. ... The rules of the game are easy to learn and overall it is not as expensive as baseball.” Not until December 1935 did a new soccer club emerge, this one composed of Mexican-descent players exclusively. By the mid-1930s the U.S. economy began to recover and the formation of a new amateur athletic association (Mexican Athletic Association of Southern California) helped revive soccer in the Mexican-origin community of this region.

The moniker Azteca was quite popular among soccer players of this era (a popular sport club in Houston, Texas, which also fielded a soccer club, was named El Club Deportivo Azteca). The term reflected a rise in Mexican nationalism that reached its zenith in the postrevolutionary period for Mexicans both inside and outside of the homeland. One squad that proudly carried this nickname in southern California was coached by Guillermo Mohler, a German émigré from Mexico City who played for the national team. He eventually began holding practices in Cathedral Field on Broadway Street until enough players committed themselves to weekly practices. To build a fan base and compete with baseball, Mohler decided to play matches at White Sox Park instead of Loyola Field. White Sox Park was closer to East Los Angeles and was home to Mexican American and African American baseball teams. Soccer matches were free and often followed baseball games at White Sox Park. La Opinión announced that “This group of young players that make up the Aztecas can be considered the forerunners of Mexican soccer in southern California and have the potential to lift the sport of soccer to the same level as baseball and
boxing within our community." In 1936, Mohler's Aztecas were in first place in the Southern California Soccer League and won the city soccer championship.

The sport of soccer, during first half of the 20th century, was an exclusively masculine domain. The male bonding that takes place on and off the soccer field produces and reproduces a dominant model of masculine behavior such as toughness, aggression, competitiveness, and rowdiness. Female spectators were admitted at games but were discouraged from playing. One of the few times that women were allowed to set foot on a pitch was for the ceremonial first kick of a match. Another occasion was during a 1927 match between Club América and Union Española, when "the most beautiful little ladies representing Mexico, South America, and Spain were crowned queens for the duration of the sport festival." Although women's soccer dates back to the 1930s in England, the sport was relegated to gym classes and intramural contests in the United States until the 1970s, when the landmark Title IX mandated gender equity in college athletics.

**Dribble Diversion**

The sport of basketball began in 1891 as a small indoor ball-and-basket activity at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, and quickly spread to other YMCA chapters in the United States and other countries. Invented by physical education instructor James Naismith, basketball eventually made its way into high school and college gyms and inner-city playgrounds. By the 1920s various professional and barnstorming teams emerged, such as the famous Harlem Globetrotters (which exist to this day). Because the game requires a small space and little equipment and is played indoors during winter, it proved attractive for children of working-class populations living in crowded tenements. YMCA directors, schoolteachers, and Progressive-era reformers saw basketball as an ideal game for teaching teamwork, cooperation, and discipline and most of all for keeping kids off the city streets. Mostly children of immigrants growing up in East Coast cities helped popularize the sport. Children of European Jewish immigrants made basketball their favorite sport inside community centers, public schools, and settlement houses. Basketball also became a favorite spectator sport in those neighborhoods. In the early 1900s Jewish men dominated basketball teams at city colleges and various professional leagues in eastern cities. One of the earliest was the original Celtics, founded as a New York City settlement house team with Jewish, German, and Irish players; by the 1920s it became a popular barnstorming squad.

Basketball's popularity was not limited to the United States; it also spread throughout Latin America. The opening of YMCA's foreign service chapters in South America, Mexico, and Caribbean Islands often bolstered nascent
national physical education and sport programs that included gymnastics, bowling, fencing, volleyball, and basketball. Introducing YMCA sports to other countries was also a means toward advancing the Protestant brand of Christianity and promoting cultural conformity. According to historian Clifford Putney, the YMCA not only promoted religion in sport but also sought to teach the values of Anglo-Saxon culture to immigrants and foreigners. Several YMCA chapters were organized in Mexico, the largest in Mexico City, and smaller ones in Chihuahua and Monterrey. Within months of the Mexico City YMCA's opening in 1902, Secretary George Babcock observed that "the gymnasium attracted much attention and became the pioneer establishment of its kind in the Republic. Basketball and hand-ball were introduced and immediately took root." During the 1920s that facility's team made a "goodwill tour" to the United States, playing exhibition games in 25 cities. Another popular basketball team in Mexico were the Red Devils, formed by members of Circulo Mercantil Mutualista, the leading athletic club in Monterrey. By 1930, according to Red Devils coach Oscar Castillon, "basketball [became] the most popular sport with a total of 40,000 players."

The YMCA also played a critical role in introducing sports to Mexican communities throughout the United States. In Los Angeles, for example, the YMCA introduced basketball to new immigrants. "The foreign colonies," explained the Americanization secretary of the Los Angeles YMCA, "which are nearly all located along the Los Angeles River, are an important part of the city's life and cannot be ignored." In transforming immigrants into "New Americans," the YMCA conducted "English-for-foreigners classes, educational groups, boys' clubs, hiking trips, Bible classes." One of these boys' clubs was also a basketball team named Club Atlético Yaqui (referring to the indigenous group from Sonora, Mexico) sponsored by La Rama Mexicana de la YMCA. During the 1920s the YMCA primarily targeted teenage boys and young adults of Mexican descent because women were excluded from the sport until they formed their own league in the early part of the following decade.

In 1921 José Arteaga and Lamberto Alvarez Gayou founded the first Mexican basketball team in Los Angeles called Bohemia (soon renamed El Club Deportivo Los Angeles). After graduating from the University of California at Los Angeles, Gayou formed athletic clubs in East Los Angeles until he returned to Mexico to become director of the nation's sport federation, Confederación Deportiva Mexicana, under President Rodríguez's administration. Another team, Mexico A.C. emerged in 1925 to compete against Bohemia (renamed Club Deportivo Arriola) inside the Hollenbeck YMCA gym for the best basketball team in the Coast of All-Mexico basketball tournament. This annual tournament was organized by Arteaga to showcase the best passing, dribbling, and shooting skills but also players who display "patriotism and love for Mexico." When both teams played,
disagreements about referees and poor sportsmanship led to the cancel-
lation of one tournament. Although they developed into a bitter rivalry,
Arteaga stated that both teams were created to develop the amateur sport
of basketball within a crowded field of sports like baseball, which "is or-
ganized under the spirit of commercialism. One day one pitcher is with one
team and a week that same pitcher has jumped to another team because
they offered more money." As one of the leading basketball promoters
in the Los Angeles area, Arteaga criticized the commercial exploitation of
Mexican athletes by big sports promoters who "make money from them and
when they cannot succeed they get misery wages . . . ultimately becoming
tramp athletes." Despite Arteaga's defense of amateur sports, basketball
could not compete with the more popular and commercially successful
sports of boxing and baseball. For this reason, a viable basketball league
exclusively for Mexican players and fans was missing until the formation
of a new amateur sport association in the early 1930s.

In the El Paso area, it appears that basketball also enjoyed popularity
among individuals of Mexican background. As Manuel Bernardo Ramirez
noted in his 2000 doctoral dissertation, "El Pasoans: Life and Society in
Mexican El Paso, 1920-1945," there were various leagues throughout the
city during this era. Some were sponsored by churches, others by com-
mercial enterprises and even the YMCA. Ramirez quotes future Mexican
American labor and community organizer Bert Corona as saying that El
Paso "was a hot basketball town" with plenty of opportunities to play
outside of the local schools.

At the 2004 Olympics the Puerto Rican national basketball team shocked
the sports world when it defeated the U.S. "Dream Team" made up of
NBA stars with a lopsided score of 93 to 74. This enormous feat generated
interest about the basketball tradition in Puerto Rico. The introduction
of basketball in Puerto Rico began with the arrival of U.S. Navy ships to
Puerto Rico on the eve of the Spanish-American War. American sailors
challenged Puerto Ricans to a basketball game using makeshift baskets
and a soccer ball. The game was played outdoors intermittently until 1913
when the first YMCA building opened its doors in San Juan. Three years
later, the YMCA organized the first basketball tournament in Puerto Rico,
which led to the formation of the San Juan Basketball League. To generate
more interest in this new sport, the University of Puerto Rico basketball
team hosted U.S. college basketball teams from Chicago and New York
City. Poor economic conditions hampered the development of basketball
on the island. As the University of Puerto Rico's basketball coach Felicio
Torregrosa explained, "The only thing which prevents the dribble diver-
sion from rocketing to unprecedented heights is the lack of facilities. . . .
Our metropolitan area has only three courts." The university basketball
team was also invited to play against New York City colleges. During a
match against St. John's team, sports commentators were surprised by the
players’ height and described their play as “a type of basketball which might be called guerrilla warfare or race horse attack.”\textsuperscript{115} Puerto Rican players’ aggressive playing style often reinforced stereotypes about Latino athletes as fiery and quick tempered.\textsuperscript{116}

Compared to Puerto Ricans, the generally shorter stature of Mexican players was considered a hindrance in a game where big size and wingspan are critical matters. During a match between University of Kansas and University of Mexico teams, James Naismith (inventor of basketball and Kansas faculty member) suggested the elimination of the center tip-off rule because of the inequality that exists when one team has a center much taller than the other.\textsuperscript{117} During matches, sports journalists often commented on “the short stature of the Mexican players.”\textsuperscript{118} When Mexico’s top team, the All-Stars, was scheduled to play against their namesake from the Los Angeles Police, the \textit{Los Angeles Times} described them as a “crack collection” of players and claimed that, although “smaller in stature than American teams, the [Mexican] invaders rely on speed and skill in handling the ball for the majority of their points and are expected to give a good account of themselves.”\textsuperscript{119} The visitors eventually triumphed over the police by a score of 30 to 17, though referees had to stop the game during the action in order to “explain to [Mexican spectators] that booing the opponents as they shot free throws wasn’t the thing to do.”\textsuperscript{120}

One U.S. basketball coach visiting Mexico City observed that “Mexican athletes are apt pupils, they are naturally fast and good ball handlers. I don’t think any of our teams can beat them on the fast break.”\textsuperscript{121} Despite their athletic skills, one college refused to play teams from Mexico. St. John’s, a Catholic university in New York City, refused to play with a visiting team because of the Mexican government’s attack on the Church. “American citizens,” explained St. John’s director of athletics, “are aflame with indignation at the amazing, barbaric, fiendish, uncivilized persecution of Catholic natives of Mexico.”\textsuperscript{122} President Lázaro Cárdenas’ promotion of “socialist education” threatened the Catholic Church’s power in the Mexican countryside. Coincidentally, it was these rural schools that first introduced villagers to team sports like basketball.\textsuperscript{123} As is detailed in a later chapter, one of the Mexican states that has most benefited from the introduction of this program is Oaxaca. Today, people from that region (or who trace their ancestry there) are keeping alive the tradition of community “hoops” in and around the Los Angeles area.\textsuperscript{124}

\textbf{Boxing Ring as a Place for Creating Tough Hombres}

Boxing is one of the oldest sports in the world, tracing its origins to ancient Greece and Rome. These matches evolved into bare-knuckle brawls using
leather-taped hands that were only semiregulated under the London Prize Ring rules. In 1865 John Sholto Douglas, a Scottish nobleman, drew up new rules that included 3-minute rounds, 10-second counts, mandatory glove use, and 1-minute rests between rounds. The Marquess of Queensberry Rules formed the basis for modern boxing. As immigrants from England and Ireland made their way to the United States during the 19th century, they brought a passion for boxing with or without gloves. Despite the more respectable British rules, bare-knuckle fights continued, often in secret locations, throughout America’s urban working-class communities. One of the most popular bare-knuckled fighters was Irish American John L. Sullivan, who beat Paddy Ryan in 1882 to claim the first recognized world heavyweight championship. Sullivan’s popularity soared beyond working-class Irish communities when he traveled across the country offering prize money to anyone who could defeat him in four rounds.

During the 1890s, while boxing was still in its infancy, Los Angeles produced its first world champion. Born in 1871 to an Irish father and Mexican mother, Solomon García Smith, nicknamed “Solly,” began boxing as an amateur in his hometown of Culver City. After winning several state titles, he got his first opportunity to box for a world crown in 1893 at Coney Island. After losing to George Dixon, García Smith was finally granted a rematch four years later in San Francisco where he claimed the featherweight title. He defended his championship on two occasions, finally relinquishing the prize when he suffered a broken arm during a bout in 1898. Even with this injury, Solly García Smith refused to quit the contest. Although he was the first Los Angeles-area world champion, he has been mostly forgotten in lieu of other area boxers (such as Jim Jeffries). Solly’s mixed heritage, as well as the fact that he was buried in an unmarked grave, has probably also contributed to this lack of recognition.

As boxing gained popularity and became an Olympic sport in 1904, it also attracted opposition from middle-class reformers who associated prize fighting with brutality, gambling, and corruption. Between 1890 and 1914, many states outlawed prize fighting and others passed laws to regulate the sport. In 1914 California voters passed a restrictive boxing amendment that limited matches to four rounds and prize money to $25. By 1917 only 23 states had legalized boxing. In 1924 California voters permitted the sport but limited fights to 10 rounds and established a state commission to regulate professional events (and for wrestling as well). The 1920s did, however, usher in the sport’s golden age, as new clubs, stadiums, and arenas drew large crowds and generated substantial gate receipts.

During the 1920s boxing emerged as one of the most popular sports in Mexico and the Mexican communities of the United States. In the early 1900s thousands of immigrants fled northward for economic reasons and settled in segregated communities where they developed their own organizations, cultural traditions, and sporting pastimes. By the 1920s the children
of Mexican immigrants joined clubs and boxed in neighborhood gyms, vacant lots, backyards, and small halls. Many turned to boxing as way to remember their homeland and develop a Mexican national identity. Historian Douglas Monroy contends that Mexican immigrants transcended their regional differences to cheer for and support their favorite pan-Mexican boxer because they “[saw] themselves more and more as Mexicans.”

In Los Angeles, according to Gregory Rodriguez, boxing was not associated with Americanization, but “came to be identified with ‘Mexicanness’, with Mexican guts, with Mexican spirit, and with Mexican victories.” The “Mexicanization” of boxing was not simply nostalgia and longing to return to Mexico but was also linked with commercial and media interests.

Mexican amateur fighters could not enter the world of professional boxing without the support of whites who controlled facilities and arranged championship bouts. One of those boxing promoters in Southern California was Jack Doyle, who featured local Mexican boxers in his Vernon boxing arena. One very popular pugilist was José Ybarra, who changed his name to Joe Rivers to satisfy a trainer who had difficulty pronouncing his name. Despite the name change, sportswriters referred to him as “Mexican Joe” even though he claimed three-quarters Spanish ancestry and one-quarter California mission Indian. To capitalize on the popularity of “Mexican” fighters during the 1920s, a Scottish Irish boxer, Todd Faulkner, changed his name to Kid Mexico. Mexican spectators were rather surprised to see a blonde kid entering the ring. One sportswriter wrote that “Kid Mexico is the most wrong-named fighter who ever stuck out a fist. Announce him—and the audience expects to see a Herrera, a Rivers, an Ortega. [But] he isn’t Mex[ican] at all. He is Scotch and Irish.”

Strangely, Todd Faulkner’s appropriation of the “Mexico” name occurred during a period in which government officials, scholars, and press began to link crime, diseases, and delinquency to the “Mexican Problem” and called for stricter immigration laws.

Backyard boxing arenas were popular gathering places for Mexican amateur boxers who lived in segregated neighborhoods and could not afford to practice inside a boxing gym. Joe Salas was one of these backyard fighters from East Los Angeles who went on to become the first U.S. Latino Olympian. Salas recounted how he first learned to box: “There was a boxer who moved into the neighborhood, and he used to train in his backyard—he had a gym. When he was training, my friends and I would go and watch, and I thought it might be nice to know how to do that. He was an outstanding professional boxer. His name was Joe Rivers.” After training at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, he was selected to join the U.S. Olympic team along with Fidel La Barba and Jackie Fields. Salas won a silver medal in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. Upon returning to Los Angeles, Salas was honored by local officials and the Mexican Consulate office. Months later, the Mexican government invited Salas for a national
tour to receive a hero's welcome. Upon retiring professionally in 1927, Salas taught boxing at El Sereno Boys Clubs and served as a coach for the U.S. boxing team at the 1932 Olympics.  

One of the biggest attractions in southern California and Mexico was Bert Colima, who was born in Whittier as Epifanio Romero but later changed his name in honor of his mother’s home state in Mexico. Colima’s many fans would urge him on during bouts by shouting, “Andale, Co-lee-mah, Andale!” Hollywood actress Lupe Velez was one of Colima’s most ardent fans and would often yell, “Give it to him, Colima!” Known in the English-language press as the “Mexican Bearcat from Whittier,” this fighter was also acclaimed as “El Idolo de Mexico” (the Idol of Mexico). In total, Colima participated in 65 fights between 1921 and 1929, winning 56. After retiring, Colima became a trainer and worked closely with city officials to help guide delinquent youths toward positive recreational activities. During the 1930s many local fighters sought to claim Colima’s mantle, but none succeeded until the following decade when one promising pugilist, calling himself “Bert Colima II,” won the California welterweight title.

**Bert Colima**

Bert Colima was one of the most popular boxers in California during the 1920s and early 1930s. The Mexican American boxer attracted large crowds, among them Hollywood celebrities, to Jack Doyle’s Boxing Arena in Vernon, California.

Colima was born as Epifanio Romero on September 8, 1902, in a small ranch near Whittier, California, to a family of six brothers and one sister. His father was a boxing fan and repeatedly asked his son to read him the newspaper sports section. One day Epifanio picked up a pair of gloves and began fighting professional fighters. He attracted the attention of Jack Doyle, who was looking for a “good Mexican fighter” to replace Joe Rivers, who had retired. After he changed his name to Bert Colima (after his grandmother’s hometown of Colima, Mexico), he went on to a successful boxing career competing in 190 fights between 1919 and 1933.

He earned the nicknames Whittier Flash and Whittier Bearcat for his quickness, cleverness, and elegant fighting style. He held Pacific Coast championship titles in three different divisions and won the Mexican national welterweight title in the Plaza de Toros in Mexico City. Colima was treated like royalty in Mexico and was considered an idol by many Mexicans living in Los Angeles. Colima was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame on October 25, 1997.
Other Sports

In sports other than the ones covered in this chapter, very little has been written about people of Spanish-speaking background in the United States in the early 20th century. Despite the lack of media attention, Hispanics were involved in other sports in the years before 1930, and their numbers continued to increase in the following years as well. At this point, it is useful to mention the stories of a few pioneers as well as to present a few short stories that preview some of the themes that are developed further in subsequent chapters.

In distance running, particularly the marathon, one of the first Spanish-surnamed athletes to gain recognition among American fans was a Cuban mailman named Félix Carvajal, who followed a very strange path in order to compete in the 1904 Olympic Games in St. Louis. Carvajal became interested in marathon racing shortly after the establishment of the Cuban republic in 1902; the young nation, without sufficient funds to field a team for the Games, could not provide support for this diminutive individual to train and compete for the glory of the homeland in far-away Missouri. Demonstrating a tremendous amount of personal initiative, Carvajal financed his own trip by staging exhibitions all over Havana, particularly at the very heart of the capital, El Parque Central (Central Park). After generating sufficient funds, the postal employee shipped off to New Orleans, where he promptly lost the remainder of his money in a "friendly" game of craps. Not deterred, Carvajal decided he would merely run the remaining 700 miles to the venue. He arrived at the facility just hours before the race and was still wearing the same trousers and shoes he wore during his "jog" to St. Louis. An American discus thrower, Martin Sheridan, was gracious enough to use a pair of scissors to shorten the Cuban’s pants. Amazingly, even after all of his travails, Carvajal completed the race and finished fourth among 14 individuals completing the grueling 26-mile course. This accomplishment resonated with sports chroniclers who noted that Carvajal would have won a gold medal for Cuba if only "he had some coaching and a more serious attitude." Here, amazingly enough, was an individual who demonstrated the potential of athletes on a grand stage. If given the opportunity, such individuals, it appeared, could play on the same level with the best contestants in the world.

Another example of Latin Americans displaying their talents in distance running before American audiences is chronicled in a 2004 article by Mark Dyreson titled "The Foot Runners Conquer Mexico and Texas: Endurance Racing, Indigenismo, and Nationalism," which recounts the story of a group of Tarahumaran indios (Indians) from Mexico who took up an ultramarathon challenge in Texas in 1927. The key component of Dyreson's essay deals with the reaction of white spectators and reporters concerning the runners' astonishing capabilities. Many members of
the majority population simply assumed, as Mitchell’s work from 1922 pointed out, that the undisciplined “savages” simply could not complete such a monumental task. Not surprisingly, the Texan press corps provided themselves with a certain degree of leeway regarding the final results of the events in Austin:

If the indios succeeded, their success would be attributed to the fact that they were uncivilized, lived in a pristine state, and therefore were closer in abilities to certain animals than to humans. If they failed, it would be proof that the Mexican “race” was weak, inferior and given to exaggerating their puny accomplishments. Many Texans and other Americans assumed that people of such weak “stock” could not possibly compete at the same level as whites.141

Conclusion

In the years between 1880 and 1930, Spanish-surnamed people throughout the nation were faced with a changing landscape in regard to sports and recreational activities. As a result of the arrival of large numbers of Americans to the Southwest, as well as the expansion of the United States’ economic and military presence throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, the games of the Spanish empire were denigrated and eventually replaced by those of the Yankees (although, as has been discussed, Latinos helped to bring and disseminate the American games in their nations as well). In addition to the new sports in their midst, the Spanish speakers had to confront and seek to counter a series of damaging viewpoints regarding the supposed weaknesses of their minds, bodies, culture, and spirit. Not surprisingly, the hypothesis presented most forcefully and damagingly by Elmer Mitchell in 1922 gained some acceptance and many Americans assumed that descendents of the conquistadors did not have the wherewithal to compete at baseball, football, basketball, and other sports at a high level and certainly not against whites. Clearly, the stories recounted in this chapter proffer a strong counterpoint to such conjecture.

The individual athletes and teams detailed here may have come from different places and been of various national groups, but all had one thing in common: an overwhelming motivation to succeed and compete at whatever sport they played. In addition to being an integral part of the life of a community, the participation and victories by the Spanish surnamed at ballparks, gridirons, basketball courts, boxing rings, and so forth throughout the United States were more than just a straightforward triumph of one player, competitor, or squad versus another; such events were direct challenges to notions of inferiority. Because of the social, economic, and educational limitations placed on many Spanish-surnamed people during
this period, the number of athletes competing and breaking down such barriers was not large, but the pioneers of this era opened doors to future possibilities.

The coming of the Great Depression had a negative impact on some aspects of the relationship between Spanish speakers and American sport. On the one hand, it made it more difficult for community teams to survive. Additionally, the need to help families make ends meet during the calamity kept many children out of school, further limiting the number of those who had the opportunity to play interscholastic sports. Conversely, the economic downturn made the search for baseball talent that would work "cheaply" (such as the efforts of Joe Cambria and the Washington Senators) more appealing and began to open up greater possibilities for Latinos to play professional baseball. We now turn to the period from 1930 to 1950 when Latinos continued to use sport to claim social space in American society and continued to rely on such undertakings to further unify and improve their communities.

Notes

4. Guadalupe San Miguel, "Let Them All Take Heed": Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987) is an excellent resource with which to begin an examination of this topic.
5. For more information on this topic, see Jorge Iber, "On Field Foes and Racial Misperceptions: The 1961 Donna Redskins and Their Drive to the Texas State Football Championship," *International Journal of the History of Sport*.
12. Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?* 10, 53, 58, 63, 65, 68, 111, 117, and 147. For a further examination of this type of argument,


14. For more information on this issue, please see: Jose Alamillo, "Contested Playgrounds: Los Angeles Recreation and Mexican America Sports Clubs in the 1930s." Copy in author's possession.

15. In the early part of the 1900s this term came into fairly common use in order to describe various groups of Spanish-speaking peoples both in the United States and those in Latin America. For example, the term was used quite commonly among many whites in Texas and also among southerners who lived in the Tampa area (referring to the individuals of Cuban, Spanish, and Italian background who lived in Ybor City).


28. In his outstanding study on the history
of baseball in Cuba, Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria writes, "The American occupation of Cuba following the war of 1898 tilted the balance in favor of baseball, particularly when the administration of General Leonard Wood banned bullfighting the following year." Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87.


30. For a sound overview of Vincent Nava's career, see Adrian Burgos, Jr., Playing America's Game, 39-46.


32. Samuel O. Regalado, Viva Baseball!, 11.


34. Samuel O. Regalado, Viva Baseball!, 12.

35. Ibid., 13.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 22.


39. Ibid.


41. Donn Rogosin, Invisible Men, 158.


47. Torres argues that Leonardo’s nickname, Najo, comes from the fact that his blazing speed led local fans to refer to him as conejo (rabbit). As fans chanted from the stands, they began to shorten the name to Nejo. When local whites shouted in support of Leonardo’s play, they tended to pronounce the word as Najo. This is the pronunciation that ultimately stuck. See Torres, Baseball’s First Mexican-American Star, 4.

48. Ibid., 3.

49. Ibid., 36.

50. Ibid., 39-40.

51. Ibid., 101-144.


53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

62. Ibid., 19.
63. Ibid., 23.
64. Ibid., 27-115.
68. Gerald R. Gems, *For Pride, Profit and Patriarchy: Football and the Incorporation of American Cultural Values* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000) is an excellent book with which to begin an examination of this topic (particularly in regard to football).
70. Buddy Green, "The 10 Best of the Valley," 621; Roland Flores II, "Laredo/Border Area’s All-Time Top 10," 598; and Bill Knight, "El Paso’s Top 10 to Remember," 588 all in Mike Bynum, ed., *King Football*.
79. *El Heraldo de Mexico*, May 23, 1924. *Asociación Deportiva Hispano Americana* (ADHA) was an early athletic club founded on April 27, 1927, by members of the Alianza Hispano Americana. The ADHA lasted only two years when the economic crisis of 1929 severely strained the organization’s finances. *La Opinión*, May 1, 1927.

82. Hispano Americana players included César Vanoni from Argentina, Bruno Millan from Chile, and Fernando Campillo Blanco and José Pelayo from Mexico. *El Heraldo de Mexico*, April 25, 1925.


84. *España Libre*, Sept. 27, 1940.


86. *La Prensa*, Sept. 5, 1925.

87. *La Prensa*, Nov. 6, 1925.


89. *La Prensa*, Nov. 20, 1925.


92. *Mexico de Afuera* refers to "Mexico outside" of Mexico or, as the late Texas folklorist Americo Paredes termed it, "Greater Mexico." For a discussion on post-revolutionary nationalism and sports in Mexico, see Keith Brewster, "Patriotic Pastimes: The Role of Sport in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," *International Journal of the History of Sport* (2005), 139-157.


113. Manuel Bernardo Ramirez, "El Pasoans:
1880-1930

114. Los Angeles Times, May 10, 1925.
120. Ramon C. Barquin, "The First Cuban Marathon Man," *Nuestro* 13, September 1979, 63-64.
123. Los Angeles Times, April 13, 1913.
129. Los Angeles Times, April 13, 1913.
134. Los Angeles Times, May 10, 1925.
140. Ramon C. Barquin, "The First Cuban Marathon Man," *Nuestro* 13, September 1979, 63-64.