

BEISBOLEROS

Latin Americans and Baseball in the Northwest, 1914-1937

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Beginning in the late 1870s baseball teams in the United States used the services of Latin Americans. Cuba provided the bulk of the early players, though there were a few individuals from South America and Mexico. Within the United States, segregationist practices affected the participation of minority players, and Latinos were not excluded from such effects. Participation in baseball required taking the color test. If you were white enough to pass the scrutiny of the fans, the players, and the owners, you were allowed to play baseball in the United States.

Two issues explain the treatment of Latin American ball players. First, the racial history of Latin America made it possible for some Latino baseball players to be accepted as "white" and for others to be rejected as too "dark." Second, players from Latin America were accepted more readily if they fulfilled a second requirement. This is what I call "the folkloric-esoteric" image. The newspapers utilized images of strange and colorful figures from sunny islands in the Caribbean and tropical places in Latin America, which brought images of bullfighters, Spanish grandees, "revolutionaries," and other folkloric fantasies. The images could be sold to the public in a nice, appealing wrapper, which in turn fulfilled the fantasies of white readers. Not surprisingly, this was the experience of Latin American baseball players in the Northwest.

Organized baseball in the Northwest began in the late 1890s with the establishment of several minor league circuits, including Latino players. The pioneers included three Cuban-born baseball players who were hired in the Northwestern League and the Pacific Coast League. Later, players of Mexican descent joined organized baseball in the region.

The Cuban Wonders

While historians are not certain when and how baseball was introduced to Cuba, the game became the national pastime. Crew members of American ships in Cuban ports probably taught the local population baseball. Some historians credit the introduction of baseball to the invading American armies, yet others argue that Cuban youth educated in American colleges and universities introduced the sport. Over the years, Cuban baseball produced a group of talented players, who attracted the attention of the major leagues in the United States. In exhibition games played in Cuba and the United States, Cuban players showcased their skills in the field and eventually they were introduced to professional baseball in America. As early as 1871 Cuban baseball players joined major and minor league teams in the United States. Cuban players eventually reached this region.

The arrival of Cuban players in such places as Seattle, Portland, and Victoria and Vancouver, B.C., attracted the attention of the local newspapers. Reporters referred to them as the "Cuban Wonders." Between 1914 and 1922 three Cubans visited the baseball fields in the Northwest, playing for teams in the Northwestern and the Pacific Coast Leagues. The first was Jack Calvo who played in 1914 and 1916, respectively, for the Victoria and Vancouver teams in the Northwestern League. In 1916 José Acosta joined Calvo to play for the Vancouver team and returned in the 1917 season. Finally, the Seattle Indians acquired the contract of Manuel Cueto in 1922.

Jacinto "Jack" Calvo Gonzalez was born in La Habaña, Cuba, on June 11, 1894. Calvo's baseball career began in Cuba in 1913 with the Almendares team where he played winter ball for many years. In the United States, Calvo played for the Washington Senators and in the New York-New Jersey League in 1913. Farmed out to the Los Angeles team in the Pacific Coast League in 1914, Calvo played in ten games as a pinch hitter. On June 8, 1914, newspapers announced the arrival of Calvo to the Victoria team of the Northwestern League. As with other early Latino players, local newspapers noted Calvo's skin color and the fact that he encountered problems at the Canadian border. A local newspaper reported the following; "Calvo had some trouble with the immigration officers before he was allowed to land on account of his dark skin." Journalists wrote about the strange appearance of these players from sunny Cuba.

According to reports of the era, Jack Calvo brought a major league wardrobe to the Northwestern League, including a Ty Cobb bat. Reportedly, it had been a gift from the major leaguer. Described as a "sawed-off Cuban," "small hunk of Cuban," Calvo measured 5'10" and weighed 156 pounds. He was a speedy outfielder who amazed the fans with his catching heroics. For example, the *Spokane Daily Chronicle* reported the following play in one of the Victoria team's visits: "Calvo's catch off Lewis' fly in deep center field in the sixth inning was next to miraculous. He sized up the ball as it left the bat, sprinted backward and took it one-handed as it came over his shoulder." In the *Spokesman Review* the same play was recorded as follows, "In the sixth Jimmy Lewis lined one toward center, the ball traveling high, fast, and on a level, on what looked good for a triple at least. But Calvo sprinted at least 50 yards, leaped high into the air, and speared with his gloved hand the flying missile."

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* recorded the hitting and fielding heroics of Calvo as well as his skin color: "Calvo, the Cuban center drew applause by pulling down a great catch in center field. The dark-skinned visitor ran bases wild and hit the ball hard, scoring three of his team's [runs]." Throughout the season the Cuban continued to impress the journalists of the era, and they never tired of writing of his baseball skills. At the end of the season Calvo finished with a batting average of .288. In 100 games, he batted 110 hits and stole 20 bases for the Victoria team.

Two years later Jack Calvo returned to the Northwestern League and recommended José Acosta, a Cuban pitcher who had gained fame defeating major league teams in exhibition games. Concerned about the cost of transportation from Cuba, Manager Robert Brown balked at the idea. When Calvo proposed to pay half of the transportation expenses in case Acosta did not perform well for the team, Brown quickly agreed to the deal and told them to report as soon as possible.

Within a month of the agreement, Calvo and Acosta arrived in Seattle to board the boat for Vancouver. However, Canadian authorities refused to allow the Cubans on board. When Brown

was notified of the problem, he attempted to convince the authorities to let them into Canada, but to no avail. The border guards needed authorization from Ottawa before the Cubans could enter Canada. The two men waited for a response in Seattle's Hotel Frye at the team's expense. Calvo and Acosta joined the team on its way to Spokane and tried out for Vancouver in a game against Anacortes in Mount Vernon. Acosta pitched four innings and impressed Manager Brown.

On May 1, 1916, Acosta pitched his first Northwestern League game in Spokane, beating the local team by a score of 4 to 3, striking out 4 and giving 4 bases-on-balls. The newspaper reported, "His stock in trade consists of a spit ball, a curve ball and a fast ball. Added to this is an important delivery that differs somewhat from the by-product of this country."

Despite Acosta's success, sports editors commented on the size of the Cuban, "If he were five or six inches taller, possibly just large enough to get off the midget class, the member of that family who is pitching and sometimes playing the outer garden for Bob Brown's Vancouver club would be given a chance in the big circuit for a certainty. He is not only a good pitcher but a smart ball player." By the end of the season, Acosta won 16 games and lost 13, convincing the Vancouver team to invite him back for the 1917 season.

Jack Calvo continued to impress with his performance in hitting and fielding. In the first game of the season against the Spokane team, "he (Acosta) was saved by Calvo in the outfield. The Cuban came to the rescue of his pal and nipped two long hits off the boards that would have gone for triples." In a game against Seattle, Calvo threw from left, preventing a run to score: "Calvo got the ball near the left line and sent it home on a low line throw for the out." The Cuban outfielder was a speedster on the bases and scored for Vancouver with daring running. According to sports writers of the time, Calvo imitated Ty Cobb's running into bags, "Calvo has a wicked way of jumping into a bag with his spikes ahead of him. He gets this from Ty Cobb." For that year in the Northwestern League, Calvo batted .337 with 138 hits and 20 stolen bases. Towards the end of the season, he was sent to the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League.

Due to the effects of World War I, the 1917 season came to an early end and José Acosta left to play briefly in the Pacific Coast League. Acosta continued to play in the minor league circuits in the United States and eventually played for the Washington Senators from 1920 to 1921 and Chicago in the American League in 1922.

For Love of the Game

The "Cuban Wonders" continued to arrive in the Northwest and in the 1922 season Seattle acquired the services of Manuel Cueto. Cueto was born on February 8, 1892, in Guanajay, Cuba and attended Sister's College in Havana. As with all of the Cuban major leaguers, Cueto began his career playing for teams in the Cuban winter league. In the United States, Cueto initiated his baseball career in the South Atlantic League in 1911, playing for the Jacksonville team. Newspaper accounts and box scores erroneously identified him as Cuesta. He remained a member of the team until July 1914 and later that year joined the St. Louis Federals. From 1917 to 1919 Cueto had the opportunity to play in the majors with the Cincinnati Reds. In 1920 Cueto was sold to Seattle as partial payment for a trade. Unhappy with the deal, he refused to report to the Seattle team. Instead he played in the unaffiliated leagues in the Northeast.

In order to be readmitted into organized baseball, Cueto had to pay a fine of \$200 to the Pacific Coast League. Cueto joined Seattle in 1922, bringing with him experience in every position of the game except that of pitcher. Newspaper accounts described him as, "small but husky, tanned by the Havana sun, the little Cuban is no bigger than Billy Lane, but he owns a brace of shoulders which suggests real batting power." The *Post-Intelligencer* wrote, "Cueto is at home in the infield, and he can roam the gardens with the best of them. The Cuban has plenty of speed and is a good hitter, which is proven by the fact that he batted .298 with Cincinnati in 1918." Of the three Cuban players there is little information on their treatment. However, an interview recorded in the *Post-Intelligencer* gives us of a glimpse of their character as well as how they were treated by some journalists:

Cueto, he plays baseball because he loves the game. Ever since knee high Cueto plays American game. Come to this country and make good. Go to big leagues, hit well, field fine for Cincinnati. Break my shoulders go to minors. Play good again came back. Then Moran do me dirty trick. Take my World Series money away. Send me to Seattle. Bad man, Moran. President Klepper Seattle owner not give me fair deal. I play independent ball. Knock over off apple, field fine. Judge Landis put me back on eligible list. But I play baseball because I love game. If I don't get a cent for play, would play baseball for nothing because I like game better than eat. And Cueto likes his groceries. When I get on field forget everything but to win, win, win.

Clearly, newspaper stories entertained the readers with the broken English of the players, a typical treatment of Latino baseball players in the United States. Still, the story reveals Cueto's commitment to the game and his response to unfair treatment in organized baseball. To the journalist's credit, the interview concluded on a positive note: "And the little Cuban went back to his cold coffee, leaving me with the impression that he meant every word he said."

After the first two games of the season, a San Francisco newspaper reported: "The hitting and fielding of little Manuel Cueto caught the eye of the crowd in both games. The Cuban played grand ball all week. When one of his admirers patted him on the shoulders and told him he was going pretty good, Cueto showed a row of white teeth and said, 'No play good here too cold. Hot weather come, then Cueto, he show you some real baseball.'"

On August 10, 1922, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* announced the sale of Cueto to the Mobile team in the Southern League. Baseball creates interesting twists in the lives of players; the three Cubans met one more time in the Dixie series of 1922. Cueto and Acosta were members of the Mobile team, champions of the Southern League, while Calvo was a member of the Fort Worth Panthers, champions of the Texas League. The Mobile team won the series.

The Almada Brothers

Fleeing the violence and political turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, the Almada family moved into the United States in the early 1910s. After failing to find housing in Tucson, Arizona, the family moved to Los Angeles. In contrast to the first Latin American players, Louie and Melo Almada followed a different path into professional baseball. Both were born in Mexico but raised and educated in Southern California. José Luis Almada was the eldest, born on September 7, 1907, in El Fuerte, Sinaloa, while Baldomero "Melo" Almada was born on February 7, 1913, in Huatabampo, Sonora.

Louie lived close to the University of Southern California, and the sports culture in the area affected him personally. The first time he saw a group of men playing softball he was intrigued by the game. Louie and Melo were naturals, excelling in every facet of sports. Louie favored football and baseball, though he tried other sports in high school. Melo joined the track team, but also excelled in baseball. While in high school, Louie helped his football and baseball teams win several city championships. Pitching for the Los Angeles High School team, Louie was unbeatable in 1925 and 1926. In his senior year Louie grew stronger, striking out 19 batters in two games and averaging 14 strike-outs in the other games.

Sam Crawford, scout for the New York Giants, discovered the star pitcher of the Los Angeles High School Romans and invited him to the New York Giants spring training in 1927. While Almada was not successful in earning a spot in the Giants' rotation, manager John McGraw saw the young pitcher's potential and sent him to the minors. However, Louie became frustrated and homesick, and returned to Southern California, missing the opportunity to be the first Mexican national in the majors.

The Seattle Indians picked up Almada in 1929, while he was playing for the San Clemente Dons, a semipro team in Southern California. According to reports, Louie was too wild as a pitcher but showed plenty of speed and intelligence in the field. As an outfielder, Ernie Johnson said of Almada, "He is as fast as any one in the club, chasing fly balls, and has a good arm. What is as important, he knows where to throw the baseball." Almada continued to impress the Seattle Indians in the outfield, "The little Mexican is far and away the best ground coverer in Seattle livery, and also packs an accurate and powerful arm."

From 1929 to 1932, Almada was the hero of many games with his timely hitting at the plate. In 1929 Seattle finished in last place, but Louie had a .305 batting average. Almada's heroics earned him the nickname "Ladies Day Louie." The impact of the Great Depression forced teams to open special nights for women and to charge less at the gates in order to increase the teams' revenues. A local sportscaster noted that Louie played great ball during the special ladies' day game. In a game between the Mission, B.C., Reds and Seattle Indians, the following occurred, "Kelly dropped Lawrence's high fly and the vocal chorus was even louder. Then, Fred Muller tripled to the score board and eardrums popped right and left from the thunder of applause. No, I am wrong. That was only a whisper compared to the noise when Ladies Day Louie Almada lofted a homer over the right field fence for the fourth and fifth runs of the inning."

In 1930 and 1931 Almada finished the seasons with a batting average of .298 and .289, respectively. Louie Almada's career in Seattle came to end when his brother Melo Almada replaced him in the outfield in 1932. Louie was picked up by the Mission Reds who kept him as their regular outfielder until 1937. In 1934 the league organized an all-star game and with the participation of the fans the players were elected to the team. By the end of the balloting more than 20,000 fans had voted for Almada, testimony to his popularity in the league. Almada continued to play solid baseball for the Mission team, but in 1938, when the team moved to Los Angeles, Louie sent in his resignation.

While not as overpowering as his brother Louie, Melo Almada pitched the Los Angeles High Romans to two city championships in 1930 and 1931 and earned himself the position of team captain. In 1932 Louie paid all of Melo's spring training expenses because the manager George Burns refused to take a chance on his brother. On April 15, 1932, the *Post-Intelligencer* reported

the release of Louie Almada and the acquisition of his younger brother. The headlines in the sports section read, "Fate plays queer trick on Brothers." The article added, "Big brother Louie represented his nineteen year old protégé in the conference and signed the papers." Behind the scenes, another story unfolded between the team and the two brothers. The team's ownership demanded from Louie a cut on his contract, which he flatly refused. This, according to Louie, was the real reason behind his release from the Seattle Indians.

With the two brothers on opposing teams, newspapers cashed in on the strange turn of events. The *Post-Intelligencer* reported, "It's quite a battle the Almada brothers are putting on this week. Louie also hit a homer inside of the park Tuesday night. He hoisted a triple to right in the first frame last night to drive in two runs and picked up a double and a single." In the same series the *P-I* recorded the meeting of the two brothers in the field, "It was a tough break for young Mel as he had robbed brother Louie of a base hit by a sparkling catch earlier in the game. Louie and Mel have featured in every game played this week."

First in the Majors

As a regular player in the 1932 season, Mel continued to improve his hitting average from a .164 on June 5 to a .291 on July 24. By October he was batting a .308 average. In the 1933 season Melo Almada continued where he left off in 1932 by recording a batting average of .331 in the month of May. The newspapers reported, "The bright spot of last week's disastrous series was the powerful hitting of Mel Almada and Art Bradbury. Mel batted .571 for the series, getting 16 hits in 28 times at bat. Mel has hit consecutively in the past 16 games." Very soon major league teams began to pay attention to young Almada. The Brooklyn Dodgers approached the Seattle Indians for his services, but the Boston Red Sox acquired him at the end of the season. Melo Almada made history by becoming the first Mexican national in the majors. As a farewell to the Mexican ball player, on August 30, 1933, the fans honored him on "Mel Almada Night." He left the Indians with a batting average of .325 and led the league in stolen bases. Melo Almada played in the majors for several years for the Boston Red Sox (1933-1937), Washington Senators (1937-1938), St. Louis Cardinals (1938-1939), and Brooklyn Dodgers (1939). He returned to the Pacific Coast League for one season with the Sacramento team in 1940. In 1972 Baldomero "Melo" Almada was inducted into Mexico's Baseball Hall of Fame.

On July 15, 1999, the Mariners celebrated the opening of Safeco Field, and old-timers were invited to attend the first game. Among them, Louie Almada was invited to the celebration of the new stadium. The *Times* reported, "Lou Almada, known as "Ladies Day Lou" because he hit so well when thousands of women attended Seattle Indians games for a dime during the Depression, had the thrill of walking onto a field 66 years after playing professionally." Few people knew he was the first Mexican national to play in the Pacific Coast League and the first Mexican to play professional ball in the Seattle area.

While at times the players suffered the discrimination typical of Latin Americans, in comparison to African American players, Latin Americans fared better on the baseball field. Even though newspaper accounts described them as dark-skinned, baseball teams allowed them to play alongside white players. Yet journalists, fans, and players ridiculed their language skills. Also, the

stories of these ball players illustrate the experience of a different segment of the Latino population in the region. Most studies of the Northwest highlight the important contribution of Mexican agricultural workers in the formation of communities in the area. Nevertheless, in the history of Pacific Northwest baseball, these early pioneers opened the doors to the great wave of Latino ball players in the 1940s and 1950s.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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