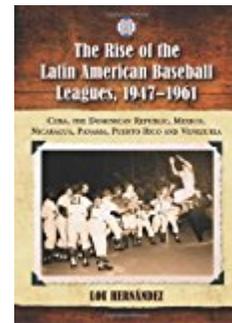


**Lou Hernández.** *The Rise of the Latin American Baseball Leagues, 1947-1961: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Puerto Rico and Venezuela.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. ix + 402 pp. \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6384-8.

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## The Rise of U.S. Baseball Hegemony in the Hispanic Caribbean Basin

Of all professional sports leagues in the United States, Major League Baseball clearly has the largest Latin American influence. In fact, the last two World Series MVPs (Most Valuable Player) have been from Colombia (Edgar Rentería, 2010) and the Dominican Republic (Albert Pujols, 2011). While Latin American baseball players have garnered a great deal of attention from North American journalists and academics, Latin American baseball leagues have received far less notice. In *The Rise of the Latin American Baseball Leagues, 1947-1961*, Society of American Baseball Research member Lou Hernández seeks to fill this gap.

Hernández's perspective is that of the baseball fan and not the academician. As a result, his account does not engage debates within the fields of Latin American history, sport history, or U.S.-Latin American relations. He directs his focus on the so-called golden age of Latin American baseball leagues, which lasted from 1947, the year Cuba joined Organized Baseball (meaning the Major and Minor Leagues of the United States), to 1961, the last year of professional baseball in Cuba. The era is bookended by two threats to Organized Baseball and its hegemony in the Americas: Mexican businessman Jorge Pasquel's attempt to recruit Major League Baseball talent to Mexico in 1946 and 1947 and the Cuban Revolution. Between 1947 and 1955, Organized Baseball incorporated the professional leagues of Cuba, Puerto Rico,

Venezuela, Panama, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico under its umbrella. This helped rid the United States of any competition in establishing its supremacy in the region. With the exception of Mexico, the countries changed their schedule to avoid conflict with the U.S. baseball season (spring and summer) and thus became known as Winter Leagues. In 1949, the leagues of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Panama participated in the first Caribbean Series, after having formed the Caribbean Professional Baseball Federation in 1948. During this golden age, the Winter Leagues showcased both local and North American talent to large audiences throughout the Caribbean.

The book is divided into seven chapters, with each chapter focusing on a particular nation. The first three chapters are dedicated to Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, respectively. The final four chapters cover the teams that participated in the Caribbean Series during this time: Cuba, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. Each chapter begins with an introduction providing background into the incorporation of each league into Organized Baseball and follows with a year-by-year chronicle of the events of that league.

The two most fascinating chapters pertain to Mexico and Cuba, mainly because of Pasquel's exploits. In 1946, Pasquel, who also happened to be the son-in-law of

former Mexican president Plutarco Calles, attempted to lure North American Caucasian players from the United States. Pasquel's actions prompted Organized Baseball to reach out to the Cuban League and ask for its help in blacklisting players (from any country) who played in Pasquel's league in Mexico. When the Cuban League balked at the idea, Organized Baseball attempted to create a rival league in Cuba that ultimately failed. By 1947, Cuban baseball team owners decided that a positive relationship with the United States would be fruitful and the Cuban Winter League became a member of Organized Baseball, which served as the first step in the United States securing its power over baseball in the Caribbean basin. The second challenge to U.S. hegemony, of course, came with the Cuban Revolution of 1959. By 1961, the Cuban Winter League had disbanded, ushering in a new era of professional baseball in the Caribbean, although Hernández does make clear how conditions changed for the other leagues.

Hernández primarily relies on articles from the weekly periodical *The Sporting News*, which employed onsite reporters in the seven nations that he examines. Although the amount of material gathered is rather impressive, it gives the book an encyclopedic quality. Most of the book consists of day-by-day accounts of specific games and focuses more on actual baseball events rather than cultural, social, or political trends. For example, if you want to know how many RBIs (Runs Batted In, for those uninitiated to baseball) Willie Mays had for Puerto Rican team Santurce in the 1955 Caribbean Series, the answer is nine (p. 372). You can also find out that Sandy Koufax gave up ten walks in his second-to-last start for Caguas in the Puerto Rican League (p. 288). What is missing from these accounts, though, is the myriad of emotions that fans, sportswriters, and players must have felt in regard to the plethora of international and intercultural exchanges taking place. There is very little systematic analysis of the nationalistic implications of the Caribbean series, which pitted four nations with strong baseball traditions against each other. Sources from each of the participating countries, in the form of newspapers and sporting magazines, would have at least partially compensated for this lacuna.

In his rundown of Latin American baseball leagues, Hernández provides glimpses into topics that merit more academic scrutiny. These include the construction of new sports stadiums following World War II (a result of the sport's increased popularity and possibly the postwar economic boom); the sponsorship of baseball teams by beer, rum, tobacco, and soft drink companies (the most blatant example being the Panamanian team, the Chesterfield-later Marlboro-Smokers) and its social ramifications; the relationship between baseball and television (a new phenomenon in the 1950s) in Latin America; and racial dynamics of Latin American baseball teams. For example, one Panamanian team, Carta Vieja (owned by the winery and rum distillery of the same name), only employed Caucasian players, whether they were foreign-born or Panamanian, whereas another Panamanian team, Spur Cola (owned by the soft drink manufacturer of the same name), appears to have consisted of entirely Afro-descendent players (at least upon visual inspection of the team photograph). The two teams, though, regularly played against each other and, in 1951, two players from Carta Vieja joined Spur Cola when it played in the Caribbean Series. This situation is one of several that Hernández introduces that could prove fruitful for historians of sport and Latin America to pursue.

In the end, Hernández accomplishes his goal of writing a year-by-year chronicle of Latin American baseball leagues from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. The book is highly readable, yet it is better suited for the unrepentant baseball fanatic than it is for the undergraduate history student. It inundates the reader with a vast amount of information and does not provide the systemic analysis demanded from academic studies. The works of Adrian Burgos (*Playing America's Game(s): Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line* [2007]), Alan Klein (*Sugarball: The American Game, The Dominican Dream* [1991]), and Rob Ruck (*The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic* [1999]) would be far more appropriate in a classroom setting, as they exhibit how to examine issues like race, political economy, and cultural exchange through Latin American baseball.

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