Book Reviews

VIVA BASEBALL!: Latin Major Leaguers and Their Special Hunger
by Samuel O. Regalado
Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1998. 224p. $39.95 (hc), $16.95 (ppr)
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After arriving in the United States in the 1950s, Felipe Alou was disgusted to find nothing but steak to eat, day after day. Accustomed to the Caribbean staples of rice and beans, Alou found the high-fat, high-protein American diet very heavy. We've all heard the stories for years about newly arrived Latin American players knowing no English but "ham and eggs" and subsisting on nothing else for months.

In this fascinating study of culture shock and the Latin American immigrant experience, Regalado shows that the difficulties experienced by Latin American ballplayers extended way beyond a mere language barrier. Latin Americans were isolated, discriminated against by teammates, managers, fans, and media, and pigeonholed by convenient stereotypes that persist to this day. It was more than a matter of simple misunderstanding: Americans not only did not recognize the cultural differences of Latin Americans, it apparently didn't even occur to them that these differences might exist and what effect they might have on Latin Americans.

Despite the presence of Latin American players in the major leagues since the turn of the century, and the large influx of Latin Americans after World War II, it wasn't until the 1960s that big-league clubs began to make any kind of special accommodation for them. The usual experience was to be assigned to the low minors in some remote backwater. "Where is Michigan City, Indiana"? Juan Marichal asked plaintively upon learning of his 1956 destination. These players were usually the only Hispanics in town. Few, if anyone, on their teams spoke Spanish. Add to this the fact that many Latin Americans were dark-skinned in a time when Jim Crow still prevailed and it is no surprise to learn of the soul-crushing loneliness and homesickness they felt. Yet, club management saw fit to do nothing for them.

Indeed, the ignorance and insensitivity of management and the media is astonishing. Journalists, unable to communicate with the Spanish-speaking players, usually resorted to ethnic stereotypes while complaining of the players' "silence". The language/culture gap also brought on attempts to "Americanize" Latin American players by giving them unwanted nicknames (e.g., Bobby instead of Roberto, Matty instead of Mateo, Minnie instead of Orestes). When players sought other Latin American players for some welcome company, they were depicted as "clannish" and earned the resentment of American teammates as well as the media.

It got no better when players learned some English, opening the door to verbatim quotations by a press apparently eager to compound the "he talks funny" image of Latin
American players, and leading players such as Roberto Clemente to regard the press warily. Clemente fought against negative media his entire career, mostly in silence, but occasionally lashing out: "The more I stay away from writers, the better I am," he once screamed. "You know why? Because they're trying to create a bad image for me. You know what they have against me? Because I'm black and Puerto Rican." At other times, reported routinely heard: "You guys never give me credit."

Other persistent stereotypes extended to Latin American players; e.g., the "lazy wetback" and the "fiery Latin". From Dolf Luque to Jose Canseco, Latin American players showing temper or any unwillingness to go along with the media have been written off as "moody". Likewise, a stint on the disabled list might lead the press or a manager to wonder about a player's work ethic or commitment to the team.

The chapter on "Fernandomania" is truly excellent. The author convincingly demonstrates that the wild enthusiasm for Mexican pitcher Fernando Valenzuela in 1981 was not only a liberation for Latin American players from the second-rate treatment they had so long received, but also a defining moment for all Hispanics, both in the United States and in Latin America, particularly Mexico. Valenzuela's popularity crossed all ethnic and even international boundaries. Even the media were sent scrambling trying to accommodate the Spanish-speaking star. The Hispanic community in the United States, so long ignored but rapidly growing in recent decades, found a catalyst in Valenzuela that forced Hispanics into the national consciousness, making them an indelible part of the American national culture. Finally, Regalado shows that with Fernandomania, baseball achieved one of those rare moments in the game's history, such as the integration of Jackie Robinson, when its significance transcends the sport to influence the society as a whole.

Drawing from a wide variety of sources (newspaper and magazine articles, personal interviews, and books), Regalado gives a general history of Latin Americans in the major leagues, while focusing mainly on the experiences of individual players, such as Minnie Minoso, Felipe Alou, Tony Oliva, Roberto Clemente, and Bobby Avila. While the author is generous in his detail of the players' baseball accomplishments, his work is as much a social and ethnic history as it is a baseball book. However, readers should not be led to think they will find the reading dull or "academic". Regalado's prose is concise and economic, he quotes liberally, and he relates numerous interesting anecdotes. Readers interested in the role of Latin Americans in baseball history, their treatment in American society, and the experiences of individual players will find Viva Baseball! an interesting and rewarding book.