

# Cooperstown's Existing Latino Vacuum

With 11 native Latinos enshrined in the Hall of Fame, cases can be made for several others who have not been elected to the hallowed halls of baseball greatness

By Peter C. Bjarkman

**B**ig-league baseball offers no hotter debates or impassioned Hot Stove League controversies than those surrounding enshrinement in the hallowed halls of Cooperstown's long-entrenched national Valhalla. Any fan wanting to stir up a true hornet's nest of divided opinion need only raise such contentious issues as a still-absent plaque for Brooklyn's beloved Gil Hodges, the questioned honors bestowed on either short-career or statistically underwhelming figures like Elmer Flick, Phil Rizzuto and Addie Joss, or justifications for sanctimoniously shunning known gamblers and perceived cheaters like Hal Chase, Pete Rose, Mark McGwire and Barry Bonds. Such debates are indeed endless and points of agreement rarely universal.



#### FELIPE ALOU

During his 17 years in the majors, Alou was a three-time All-Star who totaled 2,101 hits—including 614 for extra bases—852 RBI, 985 runs and a .286 batting average.



But when it comes to legitimate membership in the national pastime's most revered pantheon, there are at least a handful of apparently egregious oversights that do seem to strike a chord with a majority of dedicated fans. Until more recent decades, a failure to recognize the game's pre-integration-era alternative universe of Afro-American or Afro-Latino Blackball heroes remained quite as controversial and inexcusable as the sport's regrettable early 20th-century segregation legacy itself.

And perhaps no oversight seems quite as glaring here in the new millennium as the surprisingly small number of Latin American-born All-Stars so far tabbed for enshrinement either through standard balloting of the Baseball Writers' Association of America (BBWAA) or the special

efforts of recently formed Pre-Integration Era and Expansion Era committees. These committees are charged with rectifying earlier oversights among the cast of past-era players, managers, umpires and executives no longer eligible for BBWAA consideration.

To date, only 11 native Latinos have found their way into the ultimate baseball shrine. Among these, only seven have gotten there by means of the standard BBWAA balloting process. An eighth—Puerto Rican legend Roberto Clemente, the first Caribbean-region player to cross the threshold in 1973—achieved immortality via the unusual circumstance of a special enshrinement in the aftermath of his tragic demise on Dec. 31, 1972.

Clemente's fatal plane crash during a humanitarian relief





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mission to aid Nicaraguan earthquake victims occasioned replacement of an existing five-year retirement waiting period with a provision for electing athletes deceased for at least six months. Puerto Rico's most celebrated star would assuredly have found his way into Cooperstown only five years later had the previous system been retained.

Nonetheless, it would not be until 1977 that a second native Latino—Cuban Negro leaguer Martin Dihigo—was finally welcomed in alongside fellow Blackball ace John Henry "Pop" Lloyd, BBWAA honoree Ernie Banks, and Veterans Committee selections Al Lopez, Amos Rusie and Joe Sewell.

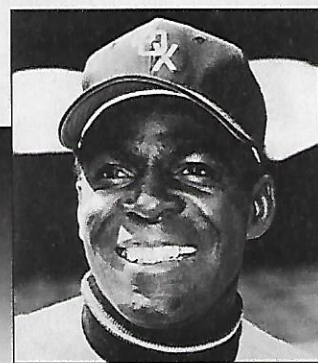
And it would be yet another full decade before "Dominican Dandy" Juan Marichal would become the first normal baseball writers' selection, and then only the better part of a decade after his celebrated career had finally closed. Marichal had been bypassed by BBWAA voters in his first three years of eligibility despite shoo-in credentials, largely due to an infamous ugly 1965 bat-wielding incident involving Dodgers catcher John Roseboro.

Two additional Cuban-born stars from pre-integration decades also eventually followed in the footsteps of the more celebrated Dihigo—but again only through auspices

of a special Negro Leagues panel charged with righting some of the sport's embarrassing earlier wrongs. Launched in 1971, the original, short-lived NLC nominated eight shamefully overlooked Negro stars over the next half-dozen years, beginning with Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, before eventually being merged in 1977 with the long-standing Veterans Committee.

Dihigo—often hailed as the game's greatest all-around multi-position player and twice (in both Cuba and Mexico) achiever of the sport's most unlikely double as both league batting champ and pitching ERA leader in the very same season—was the only Latin American among the lot.

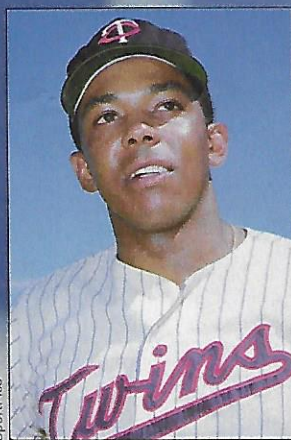
The final two Caribbean stars, however, would represent slightly more complicated cases than Dihigo. Cuban hurler José de la Caridad Méndez and slugger-outfielder Cristóbal Torriente would cross the Cooperstown portal in 2006 as part of a mass induction of 17 figures chosen by a one-time Committee on African-American Baseball. Of those inducted, in what has been seen by some as perhaps a rather large overreach of political correctness, five were executives, including the first enshrined woman, Effa Manley. Among the dozen African-heritage players, however, only



MINNIE MINOSO

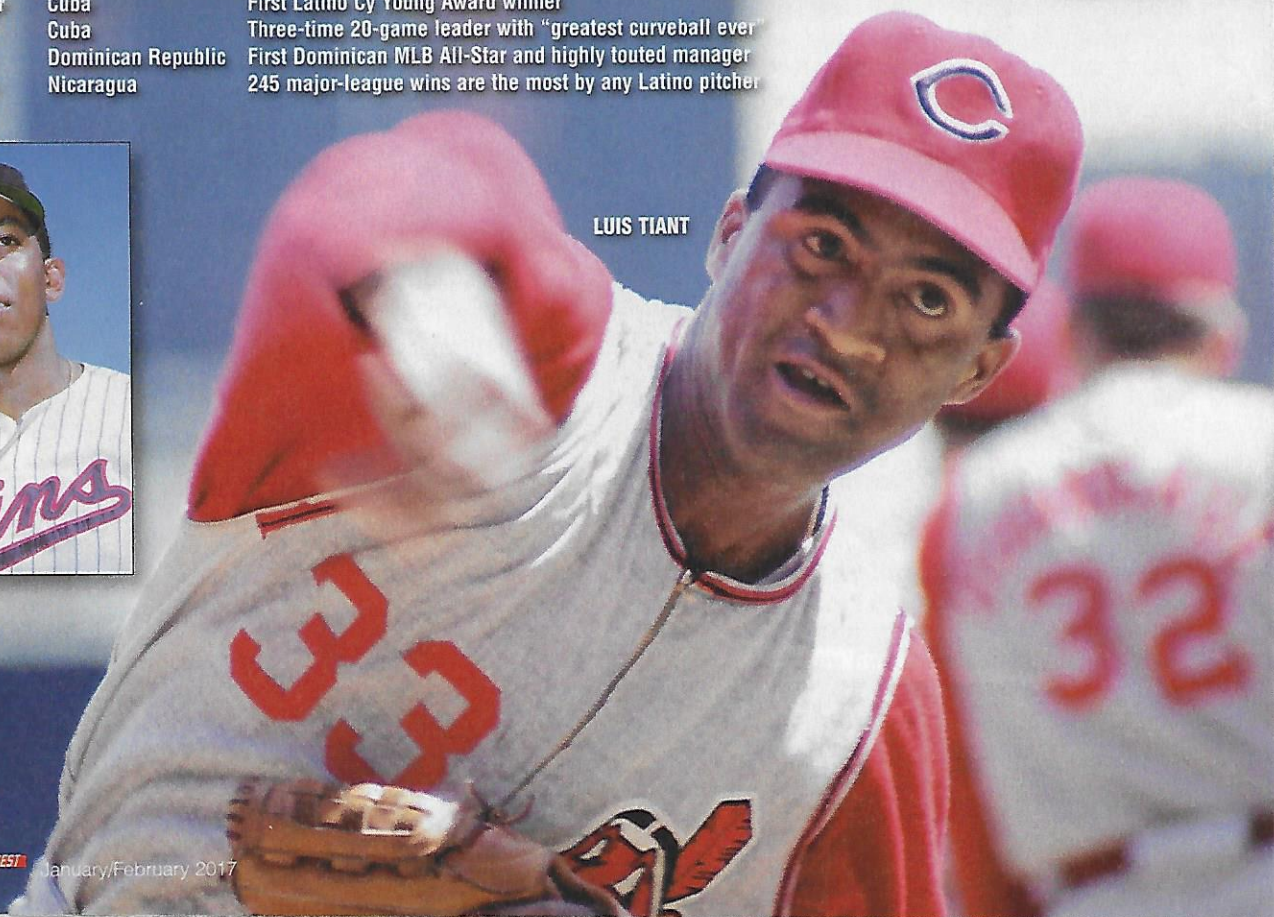
## Cooperstown's Overlooked Latino Stars

BALLPLAYER	COUNTRY	CLAIMS FOR ENSHRINEMENT
Adolfo Luque	Cuba	First true Latin American big-league star (194 MLB wins)
Orestes "Minnie" Mifoso	Cuba	Post-integration Afro-Cuban pioneer (7-time MLB All-Star)
Tony Oliva	Cuba	First MLB rookie batting champion
Luis Tiant Jr.	Cuba	Ranks third all-time among Latino pitchers in wins (229)
Miguel "Mike" Cuéllar	Cuba	First Latino Cy Young Award winner
Camilo Pascual	Cuba	Three-time 20-game leader with "greatest curveball ever"
Felipe Alou	Dominican Republic	First Dominican MLB All-Star and highly touted manager
Jose Dennis Martinez	Nicaragua	245 major-league wins are the most by any Latino pitcher



TONY OLIVA

LUIS TIANT





Méndez and Torriente were Latin Americans, and in the end they were somewhat controversial Latino selections at best.

Méndez and Torriente both rank high among legendary figures of early Negro barnstorming in Cuba, and both hold indelible spots in the lore of early Cuban baseball. It is always difficult to assess Blackball achievement due to the dearth of reliable statistical records and the consequent preponderance of word-of-mouth hagiography.

Méndez is especially troublesome on two accounts. Foremost, his impact as a pitcher on early Cuban baseball was made over an extremely short span (1908-14)—one that does not measure up to traditional Cooperstown standards of a minimum 10-year career. More important still, his legend rests on a handful of stellar outings against barnstorming big leaguers during winter exhibitions that may have been little more than today's spring training matches.

While Torriente's career boasts greater longevity and more extensive data from North American Negro leagues annals, he also falls victim to a similar historical flaw. Much of his fame is based on a single-game outing that is now known to have been little more than an embarrassing sham. The renowned 1920 faceoff with Babe Ruth in Havana was in truth a shoddy exhibition match in which vacationing New York Giants barnstormers hardly seemed to have been trying or even sober. The bulk of contemporary documentation suggests that Torriente's awesome slugging that day was actually the result of defensive indifference on the part of McGraw's rag-tag Giants lineup.

Such debates aside, there can be little argument that the apparent oversights still exist when it comes to Latin American stars. And the issue stretches far beyond the numerous dark-skinned Cubans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans or Venezuelans of the pre-World War II Blackball barnstorming eras. Latinos have now been a major presence in Major League Baseball for more than a half century, and have arguably done much to add to the sport's flair and charisma.

When Jackie Robinson opened the doors in 1947, some of the earliest beneficiaries were dark-skinned Cubans and Puerto Ricans previously hidden in Negro leagues shadows and obscured to the mainstream white sporting press while banished to play only on baseball's "dark side of the moon." Many on the newcomers in the late-1940s and early '50s were mere role players—"good field, no hit" roster fill-ins. But a handful like Clemente and Cuba's Orestes "Minnie" Miñoso were game-changing All-Stars.

In the first decade and a half of the new millennium, Latinos have annually comprised nearly one-third of all big leaguers in a sport that has of late become thoroughly internationalized. It would seem reasonable that a far larger share should have been formally recognized among the game's greatest achievers.

Even when it comes to the efforts of two special committees that have striven to right the wrongs of the pre-integration era, still Latino stars seem to have received a slimmer share of consideration than normally merited. The combined efforts of special NLC (1971-77) and the one-time CAAB (2006) panels have swollen the roles by 25, yet



ROBERTO CLEMENTE



JUAN MARICHAL



ROD CAREW

## Cooperstown's Latin American Inductees

HALL OF FAMER	COUNTRY	CLASS	SELECTION PROCESS
Roberto Clemente	Puerto Rico	1973	BBWAA (Special Waiver)
Martín Dihigo	Cuba	1977	Negro Leagues Committee
Juan Marichal	Dominican Republic	1983	BBWAA
Luis Aparicio	Venezuela	1984	BBWAA
Rod Carew	Panama	1991	BBWAA
Orlando Cepeda	Puerto Rico	1999	BBWAA
Tony (Tony) Perez	Cuba	2000	BBWAA
José de la Caridad Méndez	Cuba	2006	Committee on African American Baseball
Cristóbal Torriente	Cuba	2006	Committee on African American Baseball
Roberto Alomar	Puerto Rico	2011	BBWAA
Pedro Martínez	Dominican Republic	2015	BBWAA

only three among them have been Latino imports.

Of the early wave in baseball's Latin invasion, perhaps the most noteworthy figure was Miñoso, the charismatic heart of the '50s-era Go-Go White Sox. He preceded Clemente by a handful of seasons and his overall career (including Caribbean winter sojourns), by statistical measures at least, is largely on a par with Clemente if admittedly not quite equal. Miñoso was a seven-time A.L. All-Star as well as the first Cuban to appear in the Midsummer Classic. Before Miñoso, there was also a light-skinned Cuban pitcher who also impacted the majors as perhaps the first true Latin-born big-league notable.

Adolfo Luque is today largely forgotten, but his achievements remain more than merely noteworthy—the first Latino hurler to win a game in the World Series, the first to register 100 MLB victories, or to also pace his league in both victories and ERA. Luque easily rivals Miñoso as the greatest injustice among Latinos when it comes to failed Cooperstown consideration.

Of course there were historical reasons for such oversights when it comes to the earliest Latino stars. Stereotypes of the hot-blooded and English-mangling Latin outsider did great damage to Luque in the 1920s and '30s. The Cincinnati single-season franchise record-holder for pitching victories (27 in 1923), Luque nonetheless remains more widely and unfairly known for decking Casey Stengel in a 1923 on-field brawl and for reported gun-toting incidents while managing in his native Cuba.

If Luque and Miñoso regrettably remained largely sideshows on big-league diamonds preceding and immediately following the Second Great War, Latinos were nonetheless already a notable population on big-league diamonds by the '60s and '70s. Two in that third-generation crowd have been especially overlooked when it has come to Cooperstown ballots.

The first is Tony Oliva, the first rookie ever to win a league batting crown and the first also to turn the trick in back-to-back maiden seasons. Only late-career, severe knee injuries derailed what began as a sure-fire ticket to Cooperstown.

An equal case of injustice seems to surround Cuban Luis Tiant, third in career victories (behind Dennis Martinez and Marichal) and second in career strikeouts (trailing only Pedro



## Cooperstown's Existing Latino Vacuum

Martinez) among his Caribbean countrymen. Tiant didn't fare well in a 2014 election of the recently formed Golden Era Committee, though Oliva missed out on enshrinement by a single vote and Miñoso fell four votes short. The committee is likely to consider Miñoso, Oliva and Tiant again in 2017.

A slightly weaker case might also be made for Tiant's Cuban countryman Miguel "Mike" Cuellar, a hard-throwing southpaw in the late '60s and '70s who was a four-time 20-game winner and shared the 1969 A.L. Cy Young Award—the first such honor for any Latino hurler. Cuellar may well be destined to remain a somewhat marginal Cooperstown candidate, but his stature has nevertheless escaped its due recognition. As has the contributions of pitcher Dennis Martinez, who was born in Granada, Nicaragua and earned 245 wins in a 23-year career in the majors.

The Latino drought is likely to be rather quickly corrected in coming years. A truly impressive contingent of recent Latino stars now stand on the doorstep and few, if any of

and Miami-raised Rafael Palmeiro. On pure numbers alone, the former Cubs, Rangers and Orioles slugger now stands near—if not squarely at the top—of any list among the greatest among all Latino big leaguers. As a member of the elite group boasting membership in both the 500-homer and 3,000-hit fraternities (alongside Aaron, Mays, A-Rod and Eddie Murray), Palmeiro, on the surface, owns impeccable Cooperstown credentials. But his status is heavily marred by the infamous steroid scandals that have also now at least temporarily blocked the likes of McGwire, Bonds, Dominican Sammy Sosa, and strikeout king Roger Clemens.

Palmeiro, for the present, has become a permanent pariah as much for his post-career denials as for his now-acknowledged reliance on performance-enhancing drugs.

But how will future generations evaluate the 1990s-2000s steroid era and its celebrated scandals?

With his 600-plus homers, even media-bashed Alex Rodriguez may someday overcome a sagging public image and find his way to Cooperstown. But while claiming

## Probable Future Latino Hall of Famers

BALLPLAYER	COUNTRY	CLAIMS FOR ENSHRINEMENT
Mariano Rivera	Panama	MLB's premier closer and all-time saves leader (652)
David Ortiz	Dominican Republic	500 career home-run club, MLB home-run leader as DH
Ivan "Pudge" Rodríguez	Puerto Rico	Among baseball's all-time premier defensive catchers
Miguel Cabrera	Venezuela	Unparalleled pure hitter and slugger in the modern era
Adrian Beltre	Dominican Republic	All-time MLB base hits leader among Dominicans
Vladimir Guerrero	Dominican Republic	2,500-plus career hits, nine-time MLB All-Star selection
Héctor Espino	Mexico	Mexican League home-run king ("Mexico's Babe Ruth")
Manny Ramírez	Dominican Republic	500 career home-run club, most MLB postseason homers
Albert Pujols	Dominican Republic	500 career home-run club, 5,000-plus career total bases
Rafael Palmeiro	Cuba	500-plus career home runs, 3,000-plus career base hits
Sammy Sosa	Dominican Republic	One of 8 MLB sluggers with 600-plus career home runs



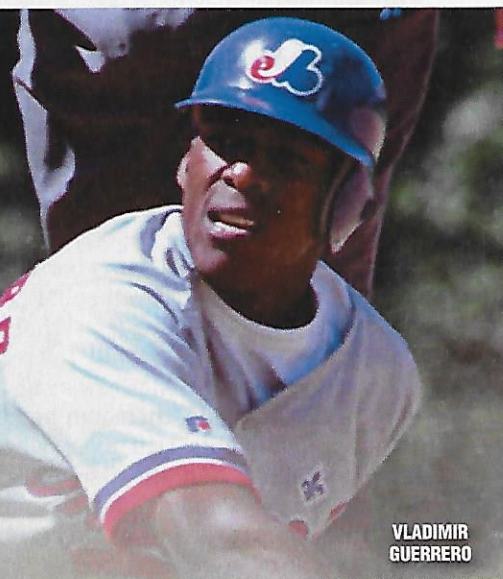
ADRIAN BELTRE



MARIANO RIVERA



ALBERT PUJOLS



VLADIMIR GUERRERO

David Durochik/SportPics

them, will likely be denied.

The recent retirement of Boston hero David "Big Papi" Ortiz launched the countdown for one for the greatest among Dominican sluggers. Compatriot Albert Pujols boasts numbers that cannot be overlooked. Despite a late-career slump, he stands within rather easy striking distance of both 600 round-trippers and 3,000 hits.

The same is likely true for Venezuela's Miguel Cabrera, the sport's most recent triple crown slugger, as well as Adrian Beltre, who has quietly become the all-time hits leader (now at 2,942 and counting) among all Dominican imports.

When it comes to pitchers and catchers, a pair of Latinos now also seem to be can't-miss immortals. Panama's Mariano Rivera—owner of a big-league-record 652 saves and the last active player to sport Jackie Robinson's permanently retired uniform number "42"—was the game's greatest closer at the height of an era in which that specialized role had become one of the modern sport's most indelible trademarks. Many will also argue that Puerto Rico's Ivan "Pudge" Rodríguez merits equal time when it comes to discussing the sport's greatest defensive catchers.

Finally, there is the highly troubling case of Cuban-born

Dominican ancestry and heritage, A-Rod is not in the strictest sense a true Latino ballplayer, having been born in New York City and raised mostly in Florida. It will thus fall to equally tarnished true imports like Manny Ramirez, Palmeiro and Sosa to swell the Latino ranks in baseball's Valhalla once the din of current controversy inevitably subsides.

The troubling off-field lives and raucous on-field behaviors of John McGraw, Ty Cobb, and Mike King Kelly have today been largely forgotten if not entirely forgiven. The same may be expected regarding contemporary sinners, and if Bonds or McGwire or Clemens are eventually given a pass, then so might Palmeiro and Sosa, and even more probably the colorful if often exasperating Manny Ramirez.

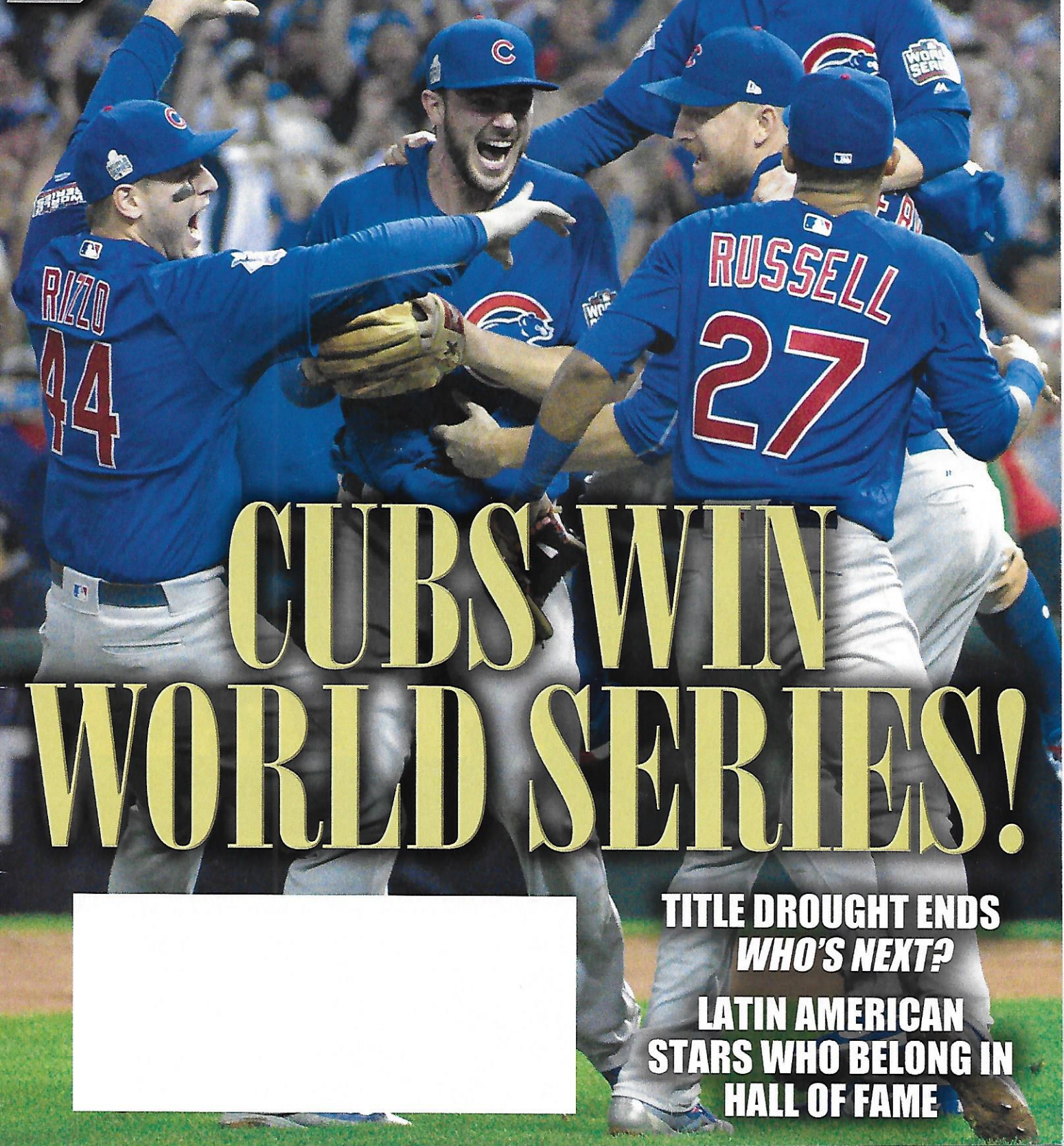
Guardians of Cooperstown's staid traditions have lately embarked on a long overdue path toward rectifying many past-era oversights. There now is ample room for optimism that this will also soon transpire when it comes to some of the national pastime's most memorable and celebrated Latin American transplants. Such seems only fitting, of course, in light of the fact that baseball has long been every bit the true national passion in Caribbean countries that it is here on the North American home front. **BD**



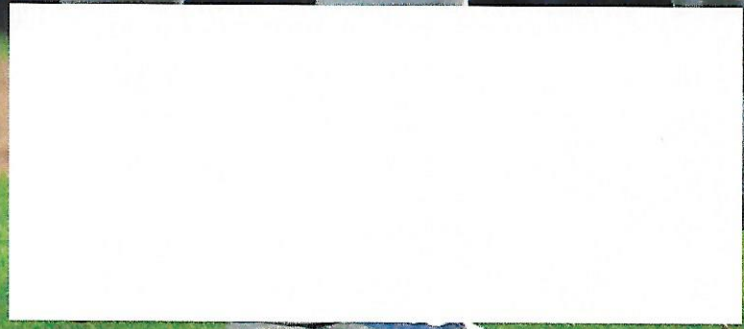
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