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Integration Before Integration: How World War II Exploded Diversity in Baseball

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INTEGRATION BEFORE INTEGRATION: HOW WWII EXPLODED DIVERSITY IN BASEBALL

Introduction

Thirteen out of sixteen Major League teams had a non-American born Latino on their roster during World War II. There were 57 Latino professional baseball players before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947. Without the mass exodus of white players serving overseas, they would not have gotten the opportunity to begin with.

As a continuation of my research on Native American baseball players during my internship at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, I look at statistics, roster transactions, and periodicals of the time to highlight four Native American players and four Latinos, and their trip to the Major Leagues to emphasize that they would not have played if it were not for World War II. Though many had short professional careers, they were trailblazers and exemplars for future foreign and nonwhite players. After WWII, owners and general managers were no longer bashful in signing foreign nonwhite players, making baseball become the world's most diverse professional sport.

Methodology

I researched four Native Americans: Rudy York, Pepper Martin, Allie Reynolds, and Cal McLish, and four Latinos: Putsy Caballero, Chico Hernandez, Nap Reyes, and Izzy León. It was not their careers that were important but rather how they got there. In the vast majority of cases, a nonwhite or foreign player only made it to the big leagues because a white player had gone off to war.

I looked at roster transactions, primary source periodicals, and game statistics to determine that these players' careers, though short, opened the door wide open for the world's most diverse sport.

Results

As of Opening Day 2013, the game is made up of almost 30% Latinos on active rosters, while Native Americans made up less than a single percent. Jackie Robinson showed others that blacks are no different than whites, they can play ball just as well, if not better than some. He gave American citizens a new way to see people of color and opened minds to their skills on the baseball field, but he was not the first to do so. Native American and Latino integration came far before Robinson, but it was the Native American like Reynolds and Martin and Latino groundbreakers like Reyes and León that gave way to the birth of a more widespread integration. The rich and diverse baseball we know today is because of World War II.

References

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- Society of American Baseball Research

