

Saint Louis Cardinals right-hander Mike Torrez. Courtesy of the Topeka Capital-Journal and the Torrez family.

The Early Life and Career of Topeka's Mike Torrez, 1946–1978: Sport as Means for Studying Latino/a Life in Kansas

by Jorge Iber

Baseball has, over its grand history, generated indelible moments that have tagged, fairly or unfairly, certain players as heroes or scapegoats for either success or catastrophic failure at critical moments. The death of Bobby Thomson, the man who hit the now-tainted home run known as the “shot heard round the world” to win the playoff between the Giants and the Dodgers in 1951, and the publication of an autobiography by the “goat” in that confrontation, Dodger hurler Ralph Branca, is but one vivid example of such tales.¹ A similar event has ties to Kansas and to the historical narrative of its Mexican American populace. The pitch of interest here was thrown by Topeka native Mike Torrez (then playing for the Boston Red Sox) to New York Yankee shortstop Bucky Dent at Fenway Park on October 2, 1978. While Dent’s round-tripper did not end the contest, it sparked the Bronx Bombers to an improbable 5–4 victory, culminating a furious rally to a division pennant.

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1. For the most recent treatments of this story, see Joshua Prager, *The Echoing Green: The Untold Story of Bobby Thomson, Ralph Branca and the Shot Heard Round the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008) and Ralph Branca, *A Moment in Time: An American Story of Baseball, Heartbreak and Grace* (New York: Scribner, 2011). For an overview of “scapegoats” in MLB history, please see Christopher Bell, *Scapegoats: Baseballers Whose Careers Are Marked by One Fateful Play* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2002), 62–87.

The purpose of this essay is to provide a brief outline of the life and early career of Mike Torrez, the son and grandson of *Mexicano* railroad workers, and to examine the role athletics played in his personal success. Additionally, the piece provides an overview of the significant role of sport in the day-to-day life of the inhabitants of the Oakland *barrio* section of Topeka. Finally, it contends that sport is a critical, yet understudied, component of life among many of the Sunflower State's Spanish-speakers, serving as a means to uplift ethnic pride and maintain cultural identity.²

The story of Michael Augustine Torrez provides an entry into three important strands of Mexican American history. First, his story can be part of a growing body of biographical literature now being generated about this group. Recent works include accounts of a federal judge, an academician, a medical doctor/civil rights activist, and a mayor of El Paso.³ Second, a perusal of the pages of *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* (and other journals) reveals a not-insignificant number of items dealing directly with Mexican Americans' role in the history of the state. While there still is not a single, comprehensive study of this topic, a great deal of spade work has been done.⁴ Third, projects concerning

Spanish-speakers in Kansas have generated insight into various historical aspects of their history (labor, religion, and education, for example), but one area that has been almost completely ignored is the role of sport in the lives of Spanish-speaking communities. Again, a quick perusal of the pages of *Kansas History* reveals that many articles have been published concerning sport, but none has focused on Latinos/as. Recent essays include a biography of a legendary official, an overview of Wilt Chamberlain's Jayhawk years, and the histories of the development of six- and eight-man football on the plains, interracial baseball in Wichita, and the significance of the Haskell Institute's football team to Native American identity.⁵ This article on Mike Torrez and his community is in line with arguments articulated and discussed in such works and follows the call made by Rita G. Napier in "Rethinking the Past, Reimagining the Future" more than a decade ago. At the very end of her piece, Napier noted that increasing the awareness of "other" groups in the state's history would make it possible to include "different stories, new actors, fresh images of Kansas. . . . This new knowledge has yarn of many colors with which to weave our future."⁶

The Torrez family came to Kansas seeking refuge from the violence of the Mexican Revolution as well as an

2. There is a growing body of literature, both academic and popular, detailing the history of Latinos/as in U.S. sport. See Jorge Iber et al., *Latinos in U.S. Sport: A History of Isolation, Cultural Identity, and Acceptance* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 2011) and Jorge Iber and Samuel O. Regalado, eds., *Mexican Americans and Sports: A Reader on Athletics and Barrio Life* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007) as starting points for this literature. For the popular literature, see for example Paul Cuadros, *A Home on the Field: How One Championship Team Inspires Hope for the Revival of Small Town America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006) and Steve Wilson, *The Boys from Little Mexico: A Season Chasing the American Dream* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 2010).

3. Louise Ann Fisch, *All Rise: Reynaldo G. Garza, the First Mexican American Federal Judge* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996); Felix D. Almaraz, Jr., *Knight Without Armor: Carlos Eduardo Castaneda, 1896–1958* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Ignacio M. Garcia, *Hector P. Garcia: In Relentless Pursuit of Justice* (Houston, Tex.: Arte Publico Press, 2003); and Mario T. Garcia, *The Making of a Mexican American Mayor: Raymond L. Telles of El Paso* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1998).

4. See, among others, Henry J. Avila, "Immigration and Integration: The Mexican American Community in Garden City, Kansas, 1900–1950," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Spring 1997): 22–37; Michael J. Broadway, "Meatpacking and Its Social and Economic Consequences for Garden City, Kansas in the 1980s," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 19 (Winter 1990): 321–44; Donald D. Stull, "'I Come to the Garden': Changing Ethnic Relations in Garden City, Kansas," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 19 (Winter 1990): 303–20; Donald D. Stull and Michael J. Broadway, "Meatpacking and Mexicans on the High Plains: From Minority to Majority in Garden City, Kansas," in *Immigrants Outside Megalopolis: Ethnic Transformation in the Heartland*, ed. Richard C. Jones (Lanham, Md.: Lexington

Books, 2008), 115–33; Tomas R. Jimenez, *Replenished Ethnicity: Mexican Americans, Immigration and Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Daniel E. Aguilar, "Mexican Immigrants in Meatpacking Areas of Kansas: Transition and Acquisition of Cultural Capital" (PhD diss., Kansas State University, 2008); Russell Wayne Graves, "Garden City: The Development of an Agricultural Community on the Great Plains" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2004); Kathie Hinnen, "Mexican Immigrants to Hutchinson, Kansas, 1905–1940: How a Temporary Haven Became Home" (master's thesis, Southwest Missouri State University, 1998); and Domingo Ricart, "Just Across the Tracks: Report on a Survey of Five Mexican Communities in the State of Kansas (Emporia, Florence, Newton, Wichita, Hutchinson)" (Report, University of Kansas, 1950).

5. Larry R. Gerlach, "Ernie Quigley: An Official for All Seasons," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 33 (Winter 2010–2011): 218–39; Aram Goudsouzian, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?: The Kansas Years of Wilt the Stilt," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Autumn 2005): 150–73; Christopher H. Lee, "Adaptation on the Plains: The Development of Six-Man and Eight-Man Football in Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Winter 1989–1990): 192–201; Jason Pendleton, "Jim Crow Strikes Out: Interracial Baseball in Wichita, Kansas, 1920–1935," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Summer 1997): 86–101; Keith A. Sculle, "'The New Carlisle of the West': Haskell Institute and Big-Time Sports, 1920–1932," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Autumn 1994): 192–208; and Kim Warren, "'All Indian Trails Lead to Lawrence, October 27 to 30, 1926': American Identity and the Dedication of Haskell Institute's Football Stadium," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 30 (Spring 2007): 2–19.

6. Rita G. Napier, "Rethinking the Past, Reimagining the Future," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Autumn 2001): 247.



Mary Torrez (standing in back) is pictured here with her parents, Calixto and Concepcion Martinez, and cousin Concepcion. As a child, Mary worked in the fields and did housework for other families in Topeka in addition to helping at home. Courtesy of the Torrez family.

opportunity to earn a better living. In many ways, their story is representative of many tens of thousands of their fellow countrymen in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁷ Mariano Torrez (Mike's paternal grandfather) was born in Leon, Guanajuato, on July 26, 1890, and crossed into the U.S. via Laredo, Texas, on March 3, 1911. There he was recruited by an *enganchista* (labor recruiter) and eventually moved to Pauline, Kansas, to work as a railroad laborer. By the time he arrived in the Sunflower State, Mariano was married to Refugio Valdivia (born August 23, 1891). The pair had a total of ten children (five boys and five girls) and one of them, Juan P. Torrez

7. There is a plethora of materials that cover the arrival and work history of Mexicans into various parts of the American West and Midwest. A good, basic textbook with which to commence a reading of this literature would be Jorge Iber and Arnoldo De Leon, *Hispanics in the American West* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2006).

(Mike's father, born June 26, 1911), arrived just months after his father's trek across the Rio Grande. Mariano spent several years living in Kansas, supporting his family and returning to Mexico whenever possible. According to Juan's younger brother Louis, sometime in 1917 Mariano's supervisor at the Santa Fe Railroad advised the young Mexican to bring his spouse and children north. The family lived in Pauline until around 1926 or 1927 then moved to an area just outside of the Oakland neighborhood, taking up residence at 118 North East Chandler Street. Louis recalled that Juan actually went quite far in regard to educational attainment and attended school until around age sixteen. However, it appears that by the mid-1920s, he was no longer interested in academic pursuits, and Mariano proffered his son a simple choice between school and work. As a result of this bit of encouragement, Juan lied about his age and was hired by the Santa Fe.⁸

The early life story of Mary, Mike's mother, and her family is comparable. Her father, Calixto Martinez, hailed from San Julian de Logos, Jalisco, and was born on October 13, 1892. He married Concepcion Marquez, who was born August 9, 1894, on October 9, 1910. The couple had eleven offspring (five boys and six girls), with the

majority of the Martinez children being American citizens, though Mary was born in Mexico on May 25, 1921. The family crossed into the U.S. in April 1922. Initially, the Martinezes lived on 235 South East Klein Street, just three or four blocks from the Torrez domicile.⁹

During childhood, Mary lived as most of her siblings and other children in the area did, working the fields when the family traveled, cleaning houses for more well-to-do Topeka residents, and having little opportunity to attend school. In a 2012 interview, Mrs. Torrez noted that she did manage to go to school in Kansas for roughly

8. These materials come from a family genealogy provided by John Torrez. A copy of these materials is in the author's possession.

9. Torrez family interviews, conducted by Jorge Iber, August 2012, copies of interviews in author's possession. Family members interviewed included Mike Torrez, John Torrez, Louis Torrez, Maria Torrez, and others.



Although they never formally dated because Mary's parents disliked American courtship practices, Juan Torrez began seeing Mary after his younger brother Louis spoke to her at community events. Courtesy of the Torrez family.

three years, but had difficulty learning English and how to read. Another element that limited Mary's schooling was her responsibilities at home. Because her older sister Panfila had married and she was the second oldest daughter, by age fourteen Mary produced the family's daily tally of tortillas each morning. Until she completed that task, her parents would not permit Mary to leave for school. Ultimately, it was determined to simply keep the young woman at home and end all efforts regarding formal education.¹⁰ Calixto and Concepcion were quite traditional and strict, and worked diligently to ensure Mary did not become too "Americanized" (particularly in regard to dating practices) as she entered her later teenage years. Such efforts, however, did not prevent Mary and Juan from meeting. The initial connections between the Martinez and Torrez families started as a result of Louis's

interactions with his future sister-in-law and other young people in the *barrio*. Juan's younger sibling was very jovial and outgoing, and when traversing the neighborhood he often engaged in friendly chats with Mary.

The Oakland neighborhood, in the shadows of the Santa Fe work yard, was financially poor but rich and vibrant in *Mexicano* culture. In addition to the *familias* keeping alive their traditions, beginning in 1914, Catholic priests were welcomed to celebrate masses, weddings, baptisms, and funerals. The local Diocese established a parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe, that year (housed in a small retail store), with a second, more permanent facility (including a school) constructed in 1921. The Our Lady of Guadalupe School eventually reached an enrollment of 275 students by the early 1930s.¹¹ In 1933 through the efforts of the congregation, the church became the

10. Ibid.

11. *Our Lady of Guadalupe Fiesta Mexicana*, 1974, brochure, 2-5.



Mary and Juan Torrez eloped in Kansas City on April 28, 1938, and later consecrated their marriage at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in Oakland. Courtesy of the Torrez family.

center of a fiesta to commemorate the *Virgen* as well as to showcase Mexican culture. The event became a fundraiser and ultimately an opportunity to share traditions with the broader populace.¹²

As the fiesta became a regular affair in the middle of the 1930s, Louis and Mary saw each other at the fair and sometimes at Mass. Louis often asked her to join him and some of his sisters to attend the movie theater or to go dancing, but Calixto never acquiesced. As a result of Louis's interactions and probably with some coaxing about there being a pretty

young lady nearby, Juan started visiting the area around 235 South East Klein Street. He was quickly smitten. Mary recalled that her future spouse complimented both her attire and physical beauty, and eventually he left notes declaring an interest in becoming better acquainted. Given her difficulty with reading, Louis usually read his older brother's messages for her. Not surprisingly, Calixto rebuffed Juan's request to court formally.¹³

There matters stood until one morning in April 1938. As usual, Mary awoke early to begin making the quota of tortillas. That day, however, the couple met clandestinely and took off to nearby Kansas City, where they wed on April 28, never having been on an actual date. Juan and Mary returned to Topeka and ultimately consecrated their marriage at their local parish. The Torrezes had a total of eight children: three boys (John, Mike, and Richard) and five girls (Ernestine, Evelyn, Mickey, Stella, and Yolanda), with Mike being their fifth. The family lived at 208 North Lake Street in Oakland, at first renting, but ultimately purchasing their domicile, in part because Juan received a settlement from the Santa Fe when he lost an eye as a result of an industrial accident in the early 1940s.

As the children grew, they attended public schools: first State Street Elementary, then Holliday Junior High, and finally, Topeka High School. While the *barrio* provided a warm, familial environment, with plenty of relatives and children to play with, the Torrez offspring were not immune from confronting some of the discriminatory practices extant in Topeka and other parts of Kansas. Research by scholars has documented the myriad difficulties the *Mexicano* populace in this neighborhood faced during the early decades of the 1900s. While the *barrio* dwellers in Oakland did tough, physical labor that others did not wish to do, they also endured low wages, limited educational and economic opportunities, and segregated facilities. As one historian noted, "in virtually every Kansas town and city, Mexicans and Mexican Americans remained segregated in movie theaters and were often restricted from some sections of city parks, churches, and other public facilities."¹⁴ In discussions

12. Kevin Groenhagen, "Torrez, Church Prepare for Fiesta Mexicana," *Kaw Valley Senior Monthly*, July 2009, 1, 3; *Our Lady of Guadalupe Fiesta*, 1983, brochure, 2.

13. Groenhagen, "Torrez, Church Prepare for Fiesta Mexicana."
14. Robert Oppenheimer, "Acculturation or Assimilation: Mexican Immigrants in Kansas, 1900 to World War II," *Western Historical Quarterly* 16 (October 1985): 432, 429-48.



Mary and Juan Torrez had eight children, of whom Mike was the fifth. They are pictured here with Ernestine, Evelyn, Johnny, Mickey, Mike (seated on far left), Stella, and Richard. Courtesy of the Torrez family.

with family members, it becomes clear how many of these customs impacted their daily lives. Both Mike and his older brother John, for example, confirmed having faced discriminatory practices at a local movie theater (Jayhawk Theater) and a public swimming pool (Gage Park) during the 1950s.¹⁵

In order to survive economically, all members contributed to the household. Mary worked at an egg factory and, like many other Mexican American women, cleaned houses. Furthermore, in order to better their

circumstances, Juan sought out other sources of income, including transporting bootleg wine to Kansas City. In this endeavor, he often utilized one of his children or their cousins as props to make it appear as if the family was merely on an outing during the clandestine runs. The children also chipped in, with Mike and John recalling efforts to raise fiesta money by picking potatoes in the early 1950s. During one of these periods of employment, Mike created a bit of a stir (and got himself, his older brother, and several cousins fired) in an early demonstration of the capabilities of his pitching arm. As John recalls, Mike was upset because he believed his tally of potatoes picked was not totaled correctly. In a fit of youthful rambunctiousness, Mike hurled a rotten tuber at his foreman, hitting him. The youths were summarily

15. John and Mike Torrez, interview, August 2012.



Mexicans and Mexican Americans faced discrimination in Topeka between the 1930s and 1950s. Mike Torrez and other young Mexican American athletes rarely competed against white teams, instead playing other Mexican American ball clubs from nearby communities. Courtesy of the Torrez family.

dismissed, but the event foreshadowed some of the “stuff” that Mike would demonstrate on a much grander stage later.

Support was one area in which whites often chose not to interact with the Spanish-surnamed population in Kansas, at least before the 1950s. Juan Torrez, for example, was an avid baseball fan and player, but Mary recalls he seldom had a chance to play on the diamond against whites.¹⁶ Mostly, teams of *Mexicanos* in this part of Topeka played at the Santa Fe and Ripley Parks and almost exclusively competed against squads from other Mexican American communities, such as Kansas City. While not given many opportunities to challenge the majority population, this generation of Torrezes passed down a knowledge and love of the game to the next, and John, Mike, and Richard benefited greatly from their expertise. According to Louis, his brother was also an excellent boxer who did, on occasion, fight white pugilists. As a result of the older generation’s love for sports, the brothers were encouraged to pursue a plethora of athletic activities. They hunted and fished, and played baseball, football, and basketball.

16. Torrez family interviews, August 2012.

Many historians have noted the role of religious and other local organizations (such as mutual aid societies, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and others) in helping to support, preserve, and provide representation to the broader society, but there is one facet, sports, that has not received sufficient attention. Indeed, by the time of Mike’s birth, *Mexicano* baseball and basketball teams were an established part of life. For the boys of the Torrez clan, the variety of athletic endeavors, even when having to work to help support their family, provided an outlet for youthful exuberance, local pride, and for Mike, eventually led to an opportunity to play baseball on the grandest stage of all: the World Series. In addition to baseball, other athletic pursuits such as softball and basketball were entrenched in the *barrios* of the Midwest. One of historian Richard Santillan’s sources, who played baseball in such leagues for years, surmised that throughout the region, “Sports were more than games. It was an entire community affair which took on political and social importance. Sports acted as a vehicle for us to plan how to confront the discrimination facing all of us.”¹⁷

Beyond the plethora of the community-based sports, the years after World War II also witnessed expanded prospects for Mexican youths to play at the high school level and in city-wide programs. This was due, in part, to increased agitation by returning veterans to improve conditions for their *hijos* and *hijas* (sons and daughters) in the public schools. As more and more *estudiantes* (students) reached high school, some found their way on to gridirons, diamonds, and courts to represent local institutions.¹⁸ Mike Torrez and his older brother John took full advantage of such offerings, excelling in various sports at Topeka High School (THS).

Juan taught his sons how to throw, catch, and hit, and sometimes took them to see professionals in action via the games of the local Class A minor league team, the Topeka Reds. One of Mike’s recollections was that he won a pitching contest staged by the club, and Jim Maloney, then the local nine’s star pitcher, encouraged and gave him tips to improve his delivery.¹⁹ Furthermore, Juan managed his

17. Richard Santillan, “Mexican Social History in the Mid-West United States: A Study of Four Generations, 1915–1995,” unpublished manuscript, 95.

18. Iber, *Latinos in U.S. Sport*, 158–61.

19. Maury Allen, “Mets’ Torrez Weathering Latest Storm,” *New York Post*, May 17, 1983, as found in Binder 18044, Mike Torrez Collection, Southwest Collection Archive, Texas Tech University.

boys in the Cosmopolitan as well as Little Leagues and gained a great reputation as a wonderful coach, even guiding his charges to city-wide titles. Contrary to Juan's experiences of having to play exclusively against other "Mexican" teams during the 1920s and 1930s, by the time he started coaching in the 1950s, John recalled that there were no "ethnic" teams in the youth leagues of Topeka. "Everybody signed up in grade school, and the players were divided up into teams." It turns out that Juan Torrez proved very popular with his charges, and not just because of his teams' successes on the field. John stated that part of his dad's appeal to area children was that "win or lose, we always got ice cream" after each ball game.²⁰

As the oldest boy, John became the first in the family to compete on behalf of THS and was among the first Mexican Americans to play basketball for the Trojans. He also played football for the school between 1958 and 1960 and pitched for the final team (from that era) fielded by this institution. The reason for THS dropping baseball was, John noted, because the sport interfered too much with the track team's schedule. Many athletes competed on both squads leading to conflicts and "I guess the track coach just had more pull!" Because of his athletic abilities, John had the opportunity to attend a junior college (Cowley County Community College in Arkansas City) and completed a technical degree in printing. He then moved on to try out with the New Mexico State University Aggies, but he did not make the football team. As a result of not earning an athletic scholarship with NMSU, John returned to Topeka where he was drafted in 1963, but not accepted into the military. Subsequently, he began a lengthy career at the Santa Fe. John also followed in his father's footsteps by being both a player and coach in Mexican American-organized athletics, remaining active until the late 2000s. For example, he was associated with a basketball team called the Topeka 7-Ups for many years. The squad played in numerous tournaments throughout the Midwest, including one of the most important, based in Omaha, Nebraska, which commenced in the mid-1950s.²¹

The Omaha tourney was, by the early 1960s, an impressive example of Mexican American community-

based sports initiatives, and it attracted teams from Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, and elsewhere in late March or early April of each year. In 1964 Mike attended and participated. Though cautioned by his older brother not to play, Mike did and garnered a write-up about his participation in the local paper. While such notoriety is usually welcomed, this story created a problem. Although he was not paid, when the Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) became aware, it ruled Mike ineligible for further participation in school-sanctioned athletics. The organization's ruling ended Mike's time on the hardwood for the Trojans, but allowed him to focus on pitching.²²

Beginning in 1964, John was also part of a group of local Mexican American leaders who commenced a similar undertaking in Topeka. Not surprisingly, the 7-Ups were a dominant team in that competition, with John and Richard both helping lead the squad to an impressive number of victories by the early 1970s.²³ Mike played on behalf of the squad after he turned professional right after high school. In an ironic twist, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, due to intermarriage and other social changes, many whites were asking for the opportunity to play in some of the highly competitive "Mexican" or "Hispanic" tournaments in the area. This created a debate among sponsors, many of whom wanted to keep the events "strictly" for the Spanish-surnamed. John was one of the organizers who argued that, with so many individuals (including members of the Torrez family) now the offspring of "mixed" ethnic relationships, it made sense to include a number of "non-Latino" athletes on squads. When some whites continued to complain to John, he poignantly reminded his fellow athletes that "now you know how we felt," back in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁴

Like younger brothers are prone to do, Mike looked up to his older sibling and, seeing that John had played football from an early age, he too wanted to participate. Neither Juan nor Mary opposed this notion, but it was John who urged Mike not to play. John, who had injured his shoulder as a senior, cautioned his brother that the hardwood would be a safer option to protect his pitching

22. Neal Russo, "Torrez Left Benson with Stinging Hand," *St. Louis (Mo.) Post-Dispatch*, April 23, 1968; John and Mike Torrez interview, August 2012.

23. *9th Annual Topeka Mexican Basketball Tournament*, brochure, copy in author's possession.

24. John and Mike Torrez interview, August 2012. See also: *9th Annual Topeka Mexican Basketball Tournament*, brochure. For a discussion on a similar topic, please see Allen Quakenbush, "Hispanic Hoops," *Topeka (Kans.) Capital-Journal*, January 8, 1991.

20. John Torrez, interview, August 2012.

21. Ibid. See also *Golden Anniversary Omaha Mexican Basketball Tournaments: 1954-2004*, sponsored by the Mexican American Athletic Club, Omaha, Nebraska, brochure, copy in author's possession.



After graduating from high school, Mike Torrez signed a \$20,000 contract with the Saint Louis Cardinals. Although the contract was for \$55,000 less than the Detroit Tigers planned to offer him, Torrez did not feel bitter. In a 1968 interview he remarked that "\$20,000 was a lot of money anyway," especially to a working-class family with eight children. Undated clipping from the Topeka Capital-Journal. Courtesy of the Topeka Capital-Journal and the Torrez family.

arm—an arm which, by Mike’s mid-teens, had started to garner attention from knowledgeable baseball personnel.

Torrez made a name for himself playing baseball in local leagues in and around Topeka by the late 1950s. He played at the Cosmopolitan, Little, and Colt levels, and eventually moved on to play higher caliber American Legion baseball with the Topeka Caps. When Mike took to the mound, he got noticed, and not just because of his 6’ 4” stature. John recalls that it was not uncommon for his younger sibling to strike out as many as fifteen or sixteen batters per outing and this led to another concern: overworking a potential professional prospect. Once

again, the older sibling stepped in. John noted that in one tournament, after Mike had pitched a complete first game of a doubleheader, his coach ordered Torrez to warm up for the second contest. John refused to allow his brother to continue, and actually threatened to take him home rather than continue.²⁵

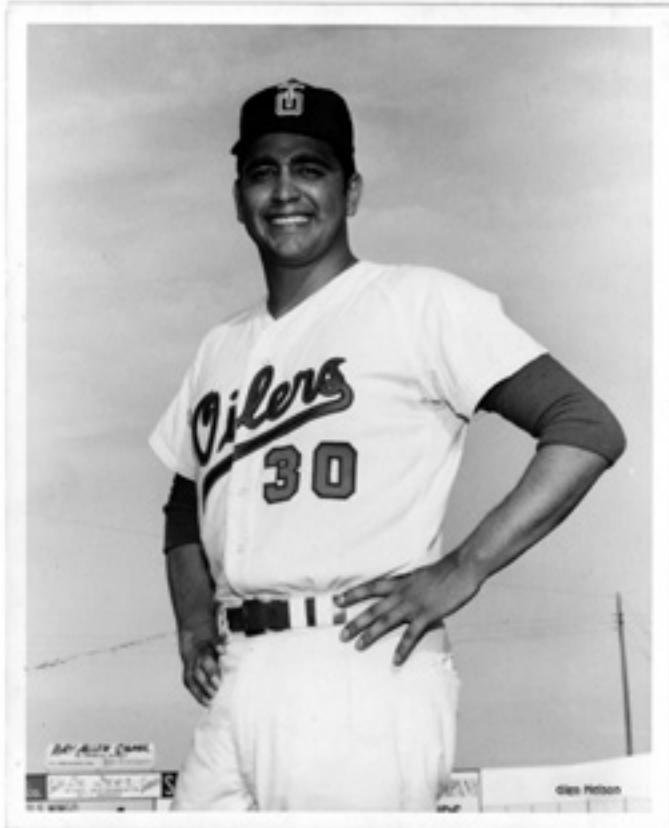
In early 1964, the eighteen-year old had just concluded a 13–1 campaign with the Van-T American Legion team, hurled the Eastern Kansas All Stars to victory over a similar squad from the western regions of the state, and wrapped up his third (and final) year of American Legion baseball by striking out eighteen batters and leading Kansas to victory over the Nebraska Legion Stars. As was standard practice for MLB teams, there were individuals who scouted specific locales for organizations. In eastern Kansas, that person on behalf of the St. Louis Cardinals was former Washburn University coach Marion McDonald. Shortly after Mike’s victory in Game 6 of the 1977 World Series for the Yankees the scout proudly recalled that Mike, as a seventeen-year old, had dominated his opposition. “What really sold me on Torrez was an American Legion game at Lawrence. The Lawrence players could hardly get their bats around fast enough to hit a fair ball.”²⁶ The prospect of trying out for an MLB organization was a chance to impact positively both the personal and familial circumstances for the Torrez clan. Even before free agency, earnings of non-front-line players in “the show” dwarfed take-home pay of a “typical” Oakland resident. As an example of the disparity, it is interesting to quote from a story in a Topeka paper just three years after Mike’s entry into professional baseball. As Bob Hartzell noted in an article in the fall of 1967, “Mike probably will draw somewhere around \$12,000 from the Cardinals next season. The two friends he was with Tuesday night don’t make that much between them.”²⁷

Juan and Mary’s many years of diligent effort and toil had, by the very early 1960s, provided a modicum of success; they owned their home as well as the adjacent lot. Juan had also been promoted over his years of service beyond “common” laborer status to carman, and later, coach carman (working on upholstery). While a step or

25. John and Mike Torrez interview, August 2012.

26. “Torrez Started as ‘Skinny’ Cager,” *St. Louis (Mo.) Globe-Democrat*, November 7, 1977.

27. Bob Hartzell, “Prep Parade,” *Topeka (Kans.) Daily Capital*, October 19, 1967.



While in the minors, Torrez played in North Carolina, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. After receiving national recognition for his pitching with the Tulsa Oilers, he was brought up to the majors for the first time by the Cardinals in September 1967. Courtesy of the Torrez family.

two above many friends and neighbors, such assets did not radically alter the *familia's* financial wherewithal. The Cardinals, however, proffered an opportunity to utilize the love of the game, and Mike's innate talent, into a transformative event. In the months after high school graduation Mike and his family worked to make this dream a reality.²⁸

To pursue his aspirations, Juan and Mike traveled beyond the familiar landscape of Topeka, east to the other side of the Show-Me State, for a tryout at Busch Stadium. After warming up, the eighteen-year-old pitched to Vernon Benson, who advised the young man to "open it up." When Mike complied, it was so impressive that the Cardinals' legendary general manager, Branch Rickey, was summoned to judge his potential. Rickey was taken aback, so much so that he refused to believe that Mike was Mexican American. The executive thought that the

young Kansan was instead a Native American because, purportedly, "he had not seen a Mexican that tall."²⁹

Rickey's statement is weighty for two reasons. First, it provides credence to the perception that Mexican Americans could not be gifted athletes. Second, it shows a perplexing lack of awareness by Rickey—just two years prior to Mike's tryout, the ERA leader for the American League was another "tall Mexican," Hank Aguirre of the Detroit Tigers.³⁰ The Cardinals did not sign Mike, but promised to get back to him. In the meantime, the Detroit Tigers gave him a tryout in Kansas City. Again, the organization showed interest. The Tigers were so impressed that their representatives visited the family domicile and asked Mike not to answer calls from other clubs. Shortly thereafter, however, the Cardinals' operatives, Charley Frey and George Silvey, offered \$20,000 for Mike's signature. This was more money than Juan would earn over multiple years of labor at the Santa Fe (he was then making around \$5,000 per year). Not surprisingly, the couple advised their son to pursue his career with St. Louis. As Mike noted in a 1968 interview, "\$20,000 was a lot of money anyway. My parents didn't know anything about contracts. With eight kids to support, there never was any money. I'm just thankful that God gave me a good arm."³¹ While this was a great deal of money, the Torrez family's lack of financial sophistication proved costly, because a short while later the Tigers offered \$75,000. While not demonstratively bitter about these circumstances, it appears such a harsh introduction to the "realities" of baseball economics was a lesson that Mike drew upon later. He reported to a facility in Hollywood, Florida, and after a couple of weeks of instruction, began a minor league career that took him to North Carolina, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.

The treatment of African Americans in the minor leagues has generated substantial research. The story of Latinos in these leagues, however, has received far less attention.³² In a 1987 essay, historian Samuel O. Regalado effectively detailed the trials and tribulations confronted

29. John and Mike Torrez interview, August 2012.

30. For a discussion on the perceived limitations of Latinos/Mexican Americans as athletes, please see Iber et al., *Latinos in U.S. Sport*, 71–76; 116–18. See also Robert E. Copley, *The Tall Mexican: The Life of Hank Aguirre: All-Star Pitcher, Businessman, Humanitarian* (Houston, Tex.: Piñata Books, 2000).

31. Russo, "Torrez Left Benson with Stinging Hand."

32. For an overview of the integration of this classification of professional baseball in the South, see Bruce Adelson, *Brushing Back Jim Crow: The Integration of Minor-League Baseball in the American South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

28. Ibid.



In the winter of 1967–1968, Torrez played with the Tigres del Licey in the Dominican Republic. Torrez, whose family emphasized learning English, did not speak fluent Spanish, which surprised many of the people he encountered while playing in the Caribbean. Courtesy of the Torrez family.

by the likes of Juan Marichal, Minnie Minoso, Felipe Alou, Luis Tiant, and others on their way to “the show” in the 1950s. The most interesting aspect of Regalado’s study examined the disparity of treatment of Latino ballplayers playing as lower-level professionals in different sections of the country. In brief, Regalado argued that individuals who wound up in places such as Tacoma, Washington, and Portland, Oregon, might have missed Latino companionship and cuisine, but they were far better off than colleagues ill-fated enough to wind up in places such as Lakeland, Florida, and Lake Charles, Louisiana. Some athletes were even more fortunate and wound up plying their trade in locales such as San Diego, California, and Phoenix, Arizona, and interacted with *comunidades* (communities) that often welcomed them with open arms.

Such courtesies were extended to the Spanish-surnamed players, whether they were mulattos, black, or Mexican American.³³

An examination of Torrez’s minor league career did not indicate that he faced situations such as those Regalado described. There appear to be two key differences from that of Mike’s Spanish-surnamed predecessors. First, by the mid-1960s, there were more Latinos in the minors and the “novelty” had been mitigated. For example, the first team for which Mike played in the Cardinals’ system (Raleigh in the Carolina League) included several other Latinos.³⁴ Furthermore, other Spanish-surnamed individuals, such as catcher Pat Corrales (who would go on to become the first Mexican American to manage a Major League squad) were present on teams to “show him the ropes” both on and off the field. Second, Mike, having been born and raised in the United States, spoke English, and, though not necessarily exposed to the totality of Southern-style Jim Crow regulations and traditions in Kansas, was not perceived in the same way as were mulatto or black Spanish-speakers.

Mike moved up the minors quickly, and to help refine his mechanics, was sent to the Instructional League in Florida. There he shined, finishing the winter of 1966 with a record of 6–1 and an ERA of 1.20. This performance merited an invitation to the Cardinals’ Major League spring training, where Mike was one of the last players demoted (to AAA affiliate Tulsa) before the start of the 1967 season. At Tulsa he benefited from the tutelage of one of the all-time great pitchers, Warren Spahn, as his manager with the Oilers as well as the advice of battery-mate Pat Corrales. During the second half of that year Torrez earned national recognition from *The Sporting News*, a critical accomplishment. Shortly after the end of Tulsa’s season, Mike was summoned to the parent club on September 10 and debuted the following day. In an auspicious beginning, Mike struck out the first batter he faced, Donn Clendenon of the Pittsburgh Pirates, to preserve a Cardinals’ victory.³⁵

33. Samuel J. Regalado, “The Minor League Experience of Latin American Baseball Players in Western Communities, 1950–1970,” *Journal of the West* 26 (January 1987): 65–70.

34. The roster of the 1965 Raleigh Cardinals can be accessed at: <http://www.baseball-reference.com/minors/team.cgi?id=3b43bae6>.

35. John Ferguson, “Think . . . and Serve Up Strikes—It’s Paying Off for Tulsa’s Torrez,” *The Sporting News*, September 2, 1967. See also Bob Hurt, “Capitalizing on Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 21, 1968.



Mike enjoyed some time with hometown fans during a day in his honor in Topeka over the July 4th holiday in 1976. He was then pitching for the Oakland Athletics, who were in town to play against the Kansas City Royals. Courtesy of the Topeka Capital-Journal and the Torrez family.

After the end of the season the Cardinals asked Mike to pitch in a winter league. It was not at all unusual for MLB teams to send talented prospects to sharpen their skills in Caribbean-based leagues. For Mike, however, his background created issues as, due to his surname, it was assumed he was fluent in *Español*. During Mike's childhood, it was not uncommon for Mexican American families not to encourage the speaking of Spanish, beyond just a few words as ethnic markers. This lack of fluency led to some thorny situations, explained Torrez, such as when "this guy called me from Santo Domingo. He was speaking Spanish and I was trying to tell him I didn't want to pitch there. But he must have misunderstood me. I don't speak Spanish too well. Anyway, he sent me a contract, and I thought what the heck, so I signed." Mike also had trouble in an interview with a Spanish-speaking radio

station. "The guy asked me in Spanish how tall I was and I told him 220 pounds. It really cracked him up."³⁶

The language barrier notwithstanding, he performed well, and a Topeka reporter observed that "word siphoning down from the Busch headquarters indicates Torrez stands a good chance of becoming the fifth starter for the Cards. At least, he'll get a good look in spring training."³⁷ It is interesting to note that Mike discussed how playing in the Caribbean forced him to miss two things he most enjoyed during Kansas winters: hunting and playing

36. Quoted in Bob Hartzell, "Prep Parade," *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 19, 1967.

37. Bob Hurt, "Capitalizing on Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 21, 1968.

“some basketball. I should get back in January and I hope to play some then—maybe some city league and some Mexican tournaments.” Even as Mike neared “the show,” sporting events among and with co-ethnics remained of vital importance.³⁸

Torrez earned his first Major League victory against Chicago on April 19, 1968. By late May, he sported a 2–1 record with a 2.64 ERA. However, the staff for the Cardinals had been so efficient that he only had 17 1/3 innings under his belt seven weeks into the season. Even though he had been effectual, with several other talented pitchers on the staff (such as Bob Gibson and Steve Carlton), General Manager Bing Devine believed it necessary for Mike to get in more work, meaning a return trip to Tulsa for more “seasoning.”³⁹

Mike finally established himself with the Cardinals in 1969, though he continued to have bouts of poor control. While sporting a 10–4 record, he followed with two subpar years of 8–10 and 1–2. Wildness, the end of a first marriage, and partying (one local reporter dubbed him a “Knight of the Neon”) were noted as reasons for a trade to Montreal. Mike pitched for the Expos between 1971 and 1974 and had a 40–32 record with some poor squads. Conflict with his manager was cited as a reason for a trade to the Orioles in 1975. In hope of improving their previous year’s finish, Baltimore then sent Mike to Oakland in a deal for Reggie Jackson the next year. In the Bay Area, Torrez joined a squad being dismantled by owner Charlie Finley and he indicated no desire to remain with the Athletics. Finally, shortly after the start of the 1977 season, Finley traded Mike to New York. It was here that Torrez earned his greatest notoriety and eventually millions via free agency. What he had already become, however, was a role model for *barrio* youths in Topeka.



Mike Torrez’s success, especially his playing in the 1977 World Series, heightened community pride among residents of the Oakland barrio. Courtesy of the Topeka Capital-Journal, 1977.

Torrez’s connection with Mexican American events continued, taking on importance during the years of the Chicano movement. As noted in an article by Leonard David Ortiz in *Kansas History* on the *movimiento* in Kansas City, around the time that Mike toiled for St. Louis, *comunidades* were awash in protest against a myriad of social and economic issues and actively sought role models for *barrio* adolescents. Among the myriad undertakings during this era (in labor, education, politics, and culture) were offerings in sport, and while not new, such activities took on more political overtones. Having a person from the *barrio* competing at the highest levels of the national pastime would only bring more positive attention and recognition for Mexican Americans.⁴⁰

38. Bob Hartzell, “Prep Parade,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 19, 1967.

39. Larry Harnly, “Cards’ Torrez Needs to Pitch,” *Springfield (Ill.) Journal-Register*, May 31, 1968; Neal Russo, “Rookie Torrez Ducks Disaster in First Victory,” *The Sporting News*, May 4, 1968.

40. Leonard David Ortiz, “‘La Voz de La Gente’: Chicano Activist Publications in the Kansas City Area, 1968–1989,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Autumn 1999): 228–44.



Over his eighteen-season career, Mike Torrez played for seven Major League baseball teams. Here he is pictured with a fan in North Topeka, ten years after Torrez's retirement from pitching. Courtesy of the Topeka Capital-Journal, August 30, 1994.

Articles in mainstream publications documented Mike's role in the community and cataloged how the media's perception of him changed. For example, one of the first exposés that chronicled Torrez's participation in the *barrio* can be seen in a 1969 piece. While the text focused on how the Cardinals were doing, the accompanying photo told another, and more significant, narrative. The photo shows a Major Leaguer sharing "tricks of the trade" with almost exclusively African American and Latino youths, presumably in his old neighborhood. Journalist Bob Hentzen's text presents Mike as a "hometown boy makes good" that all Topekans could take pride in. It is only later, as the Chicano movement became more prevalent, that it became critical for Oakland residents to directly "claim" Mike Torrez.⁴¹

To get a clearer sense of the transformation, it is necessary to turn to *barrio*-generated publications. For instance, a local journal called *Adelante* (Forward) noted in 1976 that Mike would pitch for the A's against the Royals, in nearby Kansas City, and that Topeka would honor a native son with an official proclamation. Among the day's events was an opportunity for area children to meet the pitcher. Another facet was a call for residents to visit with Chicano businesses to purchase tickets for a bus trip to the game. An additional piece noted a similar caravan had visited Royals Stadium previously when Mike pitched for the Orioles. As the anonymous author stated, Torrez "has been an inspiration to thousands of

41. Bob Hentzen, "Torrez Eyes 1964 Repeat," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 24, 1969. For a discussion of the significances of an ethnic community

"claiming" a professional athlete, please see Nicolas P. Ciotola, "Spignesi, Sinatra, and the Pittsburgh Steelers: Franco's Italian Army as an Expression of Ethnic Identity, 1972-1977," *Journal of Sport History* 27 (Summer 2000): 271-89.

Chicano kids all over America, who hope to follow in his footsteps. . . . Bien hecho, Michael!" Furthermore, Mike and his ties to Our Lady of Guadalupe parish were prominently demonstrated in Fiesta Mexicana bulletins during the mid-1970s. Here, he was included along with other local Chicanos/as who served as inspiration for youths to greater achievements in sports, business, the classroom, and other facets of life.⁴²

If the *comunidad* perceived Mike as demonstrating the aptitude and pride of Oakland's populace, such feelings increased after the 1977 World Series. As a result, Mike was not only a hero to Latinos, but now his success demonstrated the potential of *barrio* dwellers to the broader community: "these were his people—the people who raised him, had molded him, had grown up with him. Torrez obviously is not just the children's hero in Oakland. He is everybody's hero. That was obvious by the number of adults who sought autographs, handshakes and pictures. *It's really the first time I've ever been back at least where the whole community has been involved*' [emphasis added]."⁴³ The year culminated with Mike Torrez being named the 1977 Kansan of the Year by the *Topeka Daily Capital*, a first for Latinos in this state. The article discussed his upbringing and background and argued that sport was a way for ethnics to achieve success. Here was a Spanish-surnamed individual who was no longer from the "wrong side of the tracks," but rather "an accomplished American . . . [having] reached a pinnacle millions of American men and boys have dreamed about."⁴⁴ The zenith of his Mexican American dream come true occurred shortly after Game 6 when Mike signed with the Red Sox for a reported \$2.7 million over a five-year contract.

The most vivid illustration of Mike's prominence in the *barrio*, as well as the community's increased pride as a result of the Chicano movement, is documented in another Hentzen article. Here, the sportswriter asks *barrio* denizens not be too upset as a result of post-Game 6 quotations by Tor-

rez in a UPI story where his neighborhood was described as a "ghetto." Mike recalled the environs of his childhood as a locale where "there were dirt roads and old barns . . . outhouses . . . cows, pigs and chickens. . . . It wasn't no Hollywood Hills." While this does not sound much different from the source quoted earlier, it did cause consternation, in part because the years of the 1960s and 1970s had brought about new political empowerment and pride in Oakland. The pitcher modified his depiction noting that "I wasn't relating to the whole Oakland area. . . . And that was 20 years ago. . . . It's a nice place to live." Swiftly, all was forgiven and Topeka (and Oakland) feted Mike. Hentzen finalized his piece by offering a further balm to hurt feelings, stating that the community now had an important personage at the national stage, and that was something that all Mexican Americans (and Topekans) should revel in: "Big Mike ain't the type, no matter how big a baseball hero he becomes, to forget his ol' hometown."⁴⁵

A fitting way to conclude this piece is to place Mike's life in the context of developing historiographical trends in Latino/Mexican American history. As noted, biographies on Mexican Americans are gaining acceptance. One study, the life of Felix Tijerina, a restaurateur and education advocate from Houston, presents the most straightforward argument for the value of such literature. The author, Thomas H. Kreneck, argued such undertakings were necessary because "the history of Mexican Americans . . . does not have to be only the account of faceless laborers, classes, and gender as reflected in the statistics . . . and demographics." The use of biographies is not meant to replace community studies and similar efforts, merely to enrich the existing literature by adjoining to such works a sense of "'the human dimension' . . . [so that] the individual be given proper credit."⁴⁶

With a story such as Mike Torrez's, it is possible to shed light on several components of *barrio* life, as well as bringing into sharper focus the significance of this individual to his community and baseball in general. More broadly, Torrez's story, and that of other Latino/a athletes (at all levels), can be used as pathways to a fuller understanding of the totality of the Mexican American experience in Kansas and elsewhere. ■■■

42. "Mike Torrez Day!," *Adelante*, June 20, 1976, as found in Binder 10001, Mike Torrez Scrapbook Collection, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University; "Torrez, Pride of Topeka Chicano Community," October 5, 1975, unidentified clipping, Binder 10001, Mike Torrez Scrapbook Collection; Bob Hentzen, "A's Players Stick Together in Latest Fuss," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 4, 1976; *Our Lady of Guadalupe Fiesta Mexicana*, 1974, brochure; *Our Lady of Guadalupe Fiesta Mexicana*, 1976, brochure.

43. Mark Nusbaum, "Torrez Moved by Hero's Welcome," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, undated clipping, Binder 3008, Mike Torrez Scrapbook Collection.

44. Matt Walsh, "Mike Torrez: 1977 Kansan of the Year," *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 1, 1978.

45. Bob Hentzen, "Aw, Oakland Natives, Don't Be Mad at Mike," *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 21, 1977.

46. Thomas H. Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur and Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 14.