# Home and Away:

## American Ballplayers Are Flooding the Mexican League

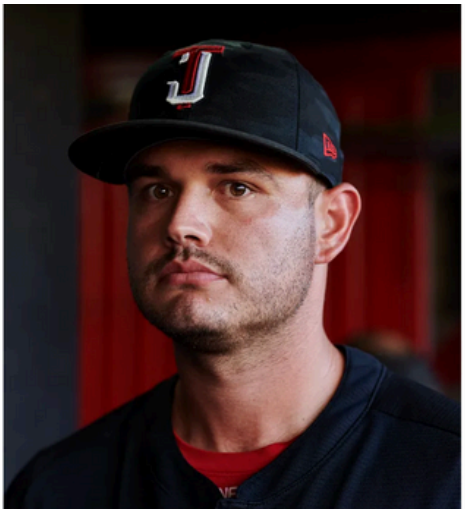
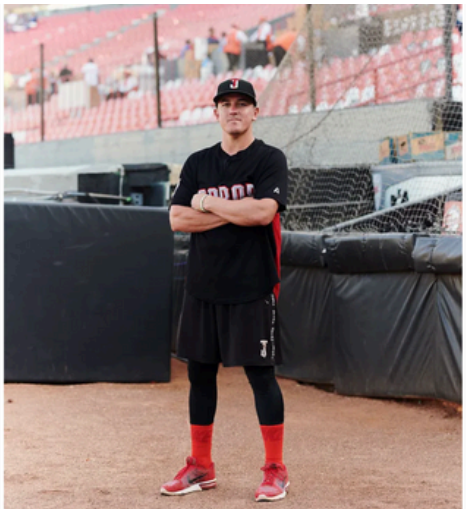
By Joseph Bien-Kahn
(for Gen at Medium)

Manny Barreda is the last to arrive when he pulls his Mustang into the players' lot a bit after 5 p.m. on a warm July night. He left his downtown San Diego apartment an hour and a half earlier, heading south on Highway 5 along the San Diego Bay, past the border towns of Chula Vista and Imperial Beach, before crossing into Mexico at San Ysidro. He drove through Tijuana Centro, then swung a left off the Boulevard de los Insurgentes onto the pock-marked residential roads that lead up to the stadium. He walked by the still-closed concession stands, high-fiving the security guard before taking the stairs down to the field. Now he silently enters the dugout, a rare state of serenity for the 30-year-old pitcher. He's on the mound today. Baseball's unwritten rules say the Tijuana Toros' starting pitcher must be left alone.

The blast of pyrotechnics near the scoreboard breaks the relative calm at Estadio Chevron, and the crowd of roughly 5,000 stands and cheers. The eight Toros fielders take their positions on the grass before Barreda jogs to the mound. Guns N' Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle" begins to play.

The stadium is still just a quarter full as the orange glow of the sunset lights up the Cerro Colorado mountain, which towers over the right-field wall. The grandstand of Estadio Chevron is a fraction of the size of Petco Park, the San Diego Padres' stadium which sits less than two hours north of Tijuana's home field. Here, pitchers still throw 90 mph darts and sluggers still hit majestic home runs, but it's hard to see a path from Tijuana to San Diego. It's much easier to come the other way.

Barreda, raised 30 minutes north of the border in Arizona, inhales and squares his shoulders towards Johnny Davis, originally from Compton, California, the leadoff hitter for the Tecolotes from Laredo. Barreda rocks back and fires and Davis sends a soft flyball to left field where it's caught by Jesús Valdez, from the Dominican Republic, who signed with the Chicago Cubs 15 years ago. Valdez lofts the ball towards shortstop Isaac Rodriguez Salazar, who moved from Sonora, Mexico to Florida for middle school. Salazar snaps it back to a strutting Barreda, who catches it, nods at the shortstop, and retakes his place upon the mound.


For most of its nearly 100-year history, the Liga Mexicana de Béisbol was the province of the Mexican-born ballplayer. When Barreda signed with the Tijuana Toros in 2015, there was a seven-man limit on foreign-born players and he was the team's only Mexican American player on the 40-man roster. But in the winter of 2016, a razor-thin majority of owners voted to expand a rule that defined who was a "native Mexican," classifying anyone with verifiable Mexican heritage as native, which allowed clubs to draw from the much deeper pool of Mexican American ballplayers from across the border. If you had a Mexican ancestor and could qualify for a Mexican passport, you were Mexican in the eyes of the league. This season, Toros Press Officer Armando Esquivel estimates that some 30% of the Liga Mexicana is Mexican American. The league's 2019 home run king is a former major league player from Redwood City, California, named Chris Carter.

The rule has made the league more competitive, but it's changed the face of Mexican baseball in the process, leading some native-born players, fans, and owners to ask an uncomfortable question: Who exactly is the Liga Mexicana de Béisbol for?

Manny Barreda can pinpoint the first moment he realized that, in the eyes of many, the United States would never fully be his. He was a teenager who threw hard, distinguishing himself as one of the best young players in Arizona. His baseball team at Sahuarita High School had become a force in the state by his sophomore year. But during the 2005 state playoffs, Barreda remembers a parent from an all-white rival high school shouting, "What are you feeding these kids? Bean and cheese burritos?" He was 16.

Barreda knows he's fortunate it even took that long. Many first-generation kids learn much younger. His parents had left Nogales, Mexico, in 1988, arriving in the United States months before Barreda was born. He was delivered in a hospital in Prescott, Arizona, near the turkey farm where his father worked. The Barredas moved back to Nogales before Manny could walk and stayed there until their son started the first grade, when the family moved to Amado, Arizona, a tiny desert town half an hour north of the border, home to 800 people, two restaurants, two mini-markets, and a food bank. Spanish was the default first language in the Barreda's new hometown. It was a community of immigrants, but Barreda was born north of that invisible line. He was as American as apple pie, at least in the eyes of the law.


Drafted by the Yankees after his senior year of high school, Barreda began the Sisyphean climb towards the Major Leagues. Minor League baseball is defined by its inconstancy: Every team is a group of guys hoping to be somewhere but where they are or just hoping to hold on. Contracts are small and rarely guaranteed beyond the year. Players are shipped up a level or down, moved across the country on a distant executive's whims.

All told, Barreda spent eight seasons in the franchise's farm system, shuttling from Tampa, Florida, to Charleston, South Carolina, to Staten Island, New York, and finally to Trenton, New Jersey. Each time he showed up in a new minor league locker room, he gravitated toward the Latino players, but to the Mexican and Central American prospects, he was an American who'd grown up "the easy way." Yet because of his name and his fluent Spanish, the white players saw him as Latino. "I wasn't accepted into either of those groups," Barreda says.

Barreda has an infectious positivity; he's a people pleaser. As an 18-year-old in rookie ball he felt certain his bilingualism could be a bridge between the two sides of the locker room, that he could translate both language and culture for his teammates. Instead, Barreda spent his minor league years in the liminal space between. He'd lived his life 30 minutes north and 30 minutes south of the border. He'd always been defined by that boundary. It didn't matter if he was in a dugout in Florida, New Jersey, or South Carolina, Barreda always seemed to find another border line to toe.

After eight years with the Yankees, Barreda was sent to the Brewers Double-A team in Huntsville, Alabama. After a year with the new club, it became clear he wasn't going to make it to the majors. So at the age of 26 he took a more lucrative offer south of the border. In 2015, Manny Barreda became a Tijuana Toro. In most cases, joining the Liga Mexicana means admitting your big league dream is over. But it also means your life in the game can go on.

When the rule to expand the definition of a native Mexican player passed in the winter of 2016, some of the league's most storied franchises threatened to leave. To the eight most established Liga teams, it felt unfair to count players born outside of Mexico — regardless of their distant heritage and ability to qualify for a passport — as "domestic" rather than "imports." The Diablos Rojos from Mexico City, the Yankees of the Liga Mexicana, played the 2017 season without a single foreign player in protest; they missed the playoffs.

But the Toros, one of the franchises that pushed hardest for the rule change, dove headfirst into the Mexican American talent pool, signing 16 Mexican American players that first season. Over a single offseason, they became a majority foreign-born team, with 22 of the players on their 2017 roster born outside of Mexico. The Toros were now a team of northern imports; Mexicans by the letter, but not the spirit, of the law.

Though Barreda considered himself bilingual, it still took about a year for him to become fully fluent. He wasn't used to using his Spanish at the grocery store, the coffee shop, in his everyday life. During 2016, he and his wife Karla lived in an apartment in Tijuana, and soon it started to feel like home. He loved the way the city forced him to talk to strangers. He learned to stay alert and to stick up for himself when dealing with shady cops. "I realized that this was my Tijuana moment," Barreda says. "Nowadays, the newer guys come at me and are like, 'Hey, I thought you were a 'real' Mexican, not Mexican American.'"

Though Barreda and his Mexican American teammates felt at home in Tijuana, other parts of the country were less hospitable to the new arrivals. In late August 2017, when the Toros squared off against the Monterrey Sultanes in the league's semifinals, the Sultanes outspoken president José Maiz García complained to the media that his team faced an uphill battle, playing against a roster that was Tijuanan in name alone. His Sultanes were not playing the ballclub from Baja Norte; they were playing the "Pocho Toros," he said. In some contexts, pocho can be a slur for a Mexican American who's cast aside his culture. In the Liga Mexicana of 2019, it's become close to the standard term for any Mexican American import to the league.

Barreda remembers a flood of anti-pocho tweets that first year, including one from a star outfielder in the Liga Mexicana de Béisbol and hundreds from fans. But a sharp tongue doesn't win ball games; when the Toros won the championship that year, Liga owners were put on notice: Mexican American talent could alter a team's fortunes

Today most Liga franchises recruit aggressively across the northern border. But none recruit more aggressively than the Toros. There are only six players born on Mexican soil on the 2019 Toros roster. All but one pitcher on their league-best staff is foreign born.

"That's one of my areas of work: to look for pochos," says Arturo Marcano, the Toros' Director of International Operations. "It's kind of like detective work."

A big part of Marcano's job is to find players from around the world who may have a parent, a grandparent or a great-grandparent of Mexican descent. The search always begins with the ballplayers with Hispanic surnames, but sometimes a scout, a former player, or a friendly coach will alert the Toros to a minor-leaguer with unexpected Mexican lineage.

Ahead of the 2019 season, Marcano signed two pocho players who neither speak Spanish nor present the least bit Latino: Logan Watkins from Wichita, Kansas, and Beau Amaral from Huntington Beach, California. "We do have sources in every league. Sometimes, some of our friends get the information and share that with us," Marcano explains. "But it's not like we have a net of spies looking for pochos everywhere. What we're doing is scouting players for the team."

Identifying a native Mexican ancestor is only the first step. Marcano then deputizes the player to track down their own birth certificate and those of ancestors on the American-born branches of their family tree. If the player's parent is Mexican, the process is relatively simple. In the case of Amaral, it was his great-grandmother who was born south of the border. A grandparent's birth certificate may note that their parent hailed from a specific town in Mexico. "Then you go to the Mexican city to get the Mexican birth certificate," Marcano says. With the ancestral birth certificate in hand, Marcano helps the player apply for a Mexican passport. "It's a long process, man."

It's no surprise that many teams were upset by the way the Toros took advantage of the rule change. The franchise is owned by Tijuana-based gasoline entrepreneur Alberto Uribe Maytorena, who can afford to invest in the lengthy bureaucratic process of signing American talent. On top of that, the team's proximity to the border means players' families can live in the States and commute to the stadium. The percentage of non-native players means the team functions bilingually. Every pitcher meeting is held in English. It's become relatively easy to attract American talent to the border town. "When guys come from other teams, they're like, 'What's going on? Am I in Mexico or am I in America?'" Barreda says.

The pochos began to arrive in the Liga Mexicana in 2017 right as the president who'd called Mexican immigrants "rapists" entered the Oval Office. It was the worst possible time for a flood of American ballplayers to come play baseball in Mexico. And no team has more pochos than the Toros. The Tijuana fans have fully adopted the Toros as their own, but in other parts of Mexico, the "Pocho Toros" remain a lightning rod franchise. "Once we go down south, people don't see us as Mexican-Americans," Barreda says. "They see us as Americans."

Yet in a way, a team of ballplayers from all over the Americas, speaking Spanglish and crossing the border to chase a dream, is strangely poetic, if a bit confused, in this moment. If a team should reflect its home, the Toros are a perfect match for Tijuana. Why wouldn't a city defined by the border have a baseball club defined by it as well?

Juan Carlos Chávez, the Toros team driver, passes north through the San Ysidro Port of Entry into the United States, aiming his hulking white passenger van decorated with painted baseball seams toward a quiet, residential neighborhood of Imperial Beach. The small Southern California border town, which sells itself as the "most Southwesterly city" in the continental United States, is starkly different from its southern neighbor. It is full of one-story bungalows with bougainvillea accents and well-tended lawns. Chávez parks a few blocks from the beach and waits for five Toro players to show up. Pointing across the sprawling green mess of salt grass and sage scrub towards some apartment buildings in the distance, he says: "Eso es Tijuana right there."

One by one, the players — Carlos Hernández, Tyson Pérez, Aaron Kurcz, James Russell, and Logan Watkins — arrive from their nearby apartments and pile in. Chávez turns the van back toward the border. It's 2:45 p.m.; batting practice starts at the stadium in Tijuana at 4.

Russell is a long-haired white Texan, one of the team's six foreign players, and the son of former Major League pitcher Jeff Russell. The other four have Mexican passports, meaning they're technically "domestic" players, at least according to the 2016 rule. Kurcz is from Las Vegas and Pérez and Hernández are from California. All three present as Latino on first glance. Watkins does not; he looks like a white guy from Kansas. Esquivel tells me, "He's got no Spanish. Not even cerveza," which Watkins disputes. In fact, Watkins says his pocho claim is better than many of the Mexican American imports that have signed in the league. His mother is half-Mexican. "I wouldn't get so much shit if I had my mom's last name," he says, though the other guys in the van aren't convinced.

As the van approaches the short border queue to reenter Mexico, each player explains his own path to the Liga Mexicana. Watkins grins as they learn that it's actually Hernández, the left-handed starting pitcher from San Jose, California, that has the most precarious claim to Mexican citizenship. Cruising through Tijuana Centro, he explains that his great-grandparents were the last of the Hernández family to be born in Mexico. The Northern California-raised pitcher didn't speak a lick of Spanish growing up and he says his parents were terrified when the Toros reached out with an offer. They haven't ever been to Tijuana to visit; they don't even have passports. "They think 'another country,'" he says. "They think 'the worst.'"

Chávez winds through a rough neighborhood near the stadium that hasn't seen the fruits of the city's recent boom times. He double-parks by the gate and the five American Toros walk down toward the field. It's taken 35 minutes to get from Imperial Beach to Estadio Chevron. 20 minutes later, the guys are dressed and in the dugout. This proximity is the Toros' greatest advantage. The border has transformed the franchise just like its hometown.

The Toros win 8-7 over the Tecolotes that night. Afterwards, fireworks explode above the outfield and a live band starts playing near the exits. It's nearly midnight now and Chávez is parked out front again, waiting to shuttle the players back to Imperial Beach. At this hour, with his Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) — like TSA pre-check for drivers — it takes only 30 minutes to get to the players' apartments. Then Chávez will cross back, for the fourth time that day, before arriving home for good. There'll be four more crossings tomorrow, and every other day the Toros play a home game during the six-month season.

It's never been harder to make the Liga Mexicana as a native-born Mexican, and Barreda understands why some native players are upset that Americans are coming south and taking their jobs. But as a child of the border, he can't help but hear the echoes of the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Trump's base.

Over these last few years, Mexico has begun to mean something different to the Barreda family. For decades, it was the place of their past, the prologue to their life in the United States. But right as Barreda leveraged his heritage into a career in the Liga Mexicana, Trump weaponized it, casting Mexican immigrants as a threat. "He's not only insulting immigrants, he's insulting me. I was born in the United States," Barreda says in frustration, trailing off. "My parents have lived in the U.S. longer than they've lived in Mexico, so where do they consider home?"

The Barredas' home state voted for Trump in 2016 despite his anti-immigrant rhetoric, or perhaps because of it. It wasn't until moving to Mexico that Barreda understood what it felt like to be seen as fully American. He has always been bisected by the generational weight of the border, somehow foreign on either side of the line.

"In the U.S., you're considered Mexican. And when you come to Mexico, you're considered an American. You're a pocho," Barreda says. "People like us, we don't have a place."

Barreda plans to throw for the Toros as long as his pitching arm allows, into his forties if he's lucky. He has made peace with the pocho label. He's not quite an import or a native, but he feels like he's where he's supposed to be. In a way, it makes sense that the longest-tenured "Pocho Toro" has fallen for Tijuana: he's both Mexican and American, and perhaps not fully either one.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