

## Cuban ‘Chico’ Hernandez star of 1938 Bloomers

Well before Jackie Robinson broke the Major League Baseball color line in 1947. Latin Americans had already made inroads into the lily-white world of the “national pastime.” The catch, of course, was that these mostly Spanish-speaking players— from places like Columbia, Cuba and Mexico—had to be light skinned. Black Latin Americans could only play in the Negro Leagues.

In 1902, Columbian-born Luis Manuel Castro suited up for the Philadelphia Athletics, becoming the first Latin American in the modern era of Major League Baseball. Others followed in a slow trickle, including Cuban-born starting pitcher Dolf Luqu, who won 194 games in a career that ended in 1935.

In 1938, the best player for the hometown minor league Bloomington Bloomers was 22-year-old Cuban catcher Chico Hernandez. Born in Havana in 1916, Salvador Jose Ramos Hernandez—“Chico” was once a common nickname for Latin ballplayers—would eventually play two years for the Chicago Cubs. During his one season in Bloomington, *Pantagraph* sports editor Fred Young described him as a “husky six-foot Cuban with a broken accent.” At the time, the Bloomers were members of the Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League, one of the nation’s oldest and most respected low minor “loops.” In 1938, the Three-I League (it was also called the “Three Eye” and “Triple Orb”) featured four teams from Illinois (Bloomington, Decatur, Moline, and Springfield), one from Indiana (Evansville), and three from Iowa (Cedar Rapids, Clinton, and Waterloo).

Hernandez had come to Bloomington by way of the Montgomery (Alabama) Bombers of the Southeastern League, which like Bloomington was affiliated with Milwaukee of the American Association and Cleveland of the American League. The 1938 Bloomers were managed by former big league catcher Bob O’Farrell, National League MVP in 1926 for the World Series champion Cardinals. “He intends to don the shin guards and mask many times before the year is over, but just now he doesn’t exactly see how he can take Chico Hernandez out of the lineup,” observed Fred Young on May 8. “The Cuban ... has shown a good arm and lots of power.” In fact, Hernandez would “don the shin guards and mask” for all 121 Three Eye games that season.

The Bloomers played at Fans Field on the city’s far south side, an aging facility with a rickety wooden grandstand. At the time, the old ball yard doubled as the McLean County 4-H fairgrounds, an arrangement that necessitated a two-week road trip in August during fair time. In addition to Hernandez, the 15-man Bloomers lineup included Bud Adams, Streator boy made good; infielder Milton “Moon” Mullen, fresh from a stint as skipper of a Titusville, Pennsylvania, semi-pro club; and Joe Skurski, a 22-year-old Pole from Chicago’s Englewood High School.

The Bloomers final game was Sunday, September 4, a wild 12-10 victory over the Springfield Browns at the “House of O’Farrell” (as Young sometimes called Fans Field). A nice crowd turned out to bid farewell to Hernandez, who left that night to join the

Milwaukee Brewers for what remained of the American Association season. As Bloomington's most popular player, the team honored him with a gold watch. Hernandez was the only Bloomer to make the Three-I League's 11-man all-star team, batting a healthy .337 in 442 plate appearances. The Bloomer backstop, though, was outshined by Moline's Lou "the Mad Russian" Novikoff, who led the league in batting average (.367), as well as hits and RBIs. Despite winning their final four games, the Bloomers ended the 1938 season in seventh place with a 56-65 record. The Evansville Bees finished atop the standings, though in the league's four-team playoff they lost to the Moline Plowboys, who in turn defeated the Decatur Commodores (known as the "Commies") to capture the postseason crown.

Ever the optimist, Fred Young of *The Pantagraph* pointed to Bloomington's season attendance of 30,000-plus as a bright spot in an otherwise disappointing campaign. That figure, though, fell well short of Evansville's gate total of some 100,000 fans, or Springfield's 75,000. In truth, Bloomington was finding it increasingly difficult to compete against rivals with better management and greater community support, and the 1939 season would prove to be the city's last in the old Three Eye.

Hernandez appeared in 90 Major League games over the 1942 and 1943 seasons, all with the Chicago Cubs. Though far from an all-star career, Hernandez made baseball history in 1942 when he and right-hander Hiram "Hi" Bithorn of Puerto Rico formed the first all-Latin American "battery," the term for the pitcher and catcher.

Salvador Jose Ramos Hernandez passed away in Havana on January 3, 1986 at the age of 70.