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MARIO “MIKE” DE LA FUENTE

Died a Longhorn Legend

BY RENE TORRES¹

Mario de la Fuente was born in 1909, he was the twelve child of Francisco de la Fuente—who was a successful rancher and merchant in Mexico. The environment to which he was born into took a turn for the worst when in 1910 the Mexican Revolution showed its ugly face. It was then, that Pancho Villa’s raids forced his family to escape to safety in Mexico City. His father had relatives there, who were high officials with the national government.

A few years later, Pancho Villa, “El Centauro del Norte” and his rebels, marched into Mexico City waving a victory banner. Yet again, Mario’s parents were compelled to removed themselves from a situation they had faced in Coahuila—stay in Mexico, and be killed, or take the train to the U.S. border.

Leaving behind all they owned . . . They decided to take a train to U.S./Mexican border—a journey full of intrigue at every turn. They eventually crossed the boundary line at Del Rio, Texas—settling into a life of poverty.

They left a trail of ballads, bullets, and banditos—only to face another battle on American soil. At five years old, Mario and his family were confronted, with more than just a tint of racism. A concept unknown to them prior to coming to the United States.

The “Promise Land” was not as inviting as they expected, and in fact, discrimination was what kept him and the rest of his fellow exiles in poverty and failure. But Mario, was carved from a different fabric, not conceding to the shouts of bigotry.

Although the voices of prejuidice had a crippling affect at the begin-

ning, he did not allow it to impede his drive for success. He fought back, not using weapons, but by becoming better than those that chose to oppress him.

Thanks to his two older sisters, he learned English, but still had problems in the classroom. Eventually, he grew into becoming an excellent student. He graduated with honors at Del Rio High School, at the same time, excelling in baseball, basketball, and football.

Baseball saved him . . .

Looking back to his grammar school years, he commented, “The sixth grade was an exciting year for me—under the fine coaching of Sam Stewart, we won the grammar school baseball championship.” Mario, was also a winner in the classroom, earning championship honors in every math contest. “I wished the six-grade had never ended,” said Mario.

After this period, he was touched by the baseball bug, and admitted that he ate, slept and dreamt baseball. His high school baseball experience had countless examples of brilliance. As a pitcher, he went undefeated in his junior and senior years leading his team to two district titles. He was a right-handed finesse pitcher that demonstrated knowledge of the game beyond his age.

In fact, in the last game of his senior year he was appointed player/coach. The official baseball coach who had vast experience in football, was clueless when it came to coaching America’s game.

Mario led his high school team, on the field and from the dugout to defeat San Antonio Brackenridge. At the time, the Alamo squad was a top power in Texas baseball at the AA level—while Del Rio was a Class “B” team.

Mario becomes a Longhorn . . .

In 1927, with \$2.64 in his pocket hitched a ride to Austin, Texas, and there finds a welcoming family that lived half a block from the university that took him in. A new chapter in his baseball career begins when the call was made for all players wishing to try out for the freshman team show up for practice. There were 45 inspiring candidates eagerly waiting to show their skills.

When the coach called pitchers to surround the pitching mound, they

were all over six feet and loaded with extra muscle. Mario, stood out like a sore thumb, at 5'10 and 155 pounds. The next words coming out of the coach's mouth, "Hey midget, referring to Mario, I said the pitchers! Not the bat boys!" There was no response from Mario—allowing his pitching to do the talking.

The message from the coach was loud and clear, "Only five of you will join the spring team to compete against the varsity." Mario demonstrated he was no "bush leaguer," and was selected to join the spring squad.

In one scrimmage game against the varsity, he took the mound at old Clark Field., the home field of the Longhorns. Mario used his dancing curveball to embarrass the batters and a pitch called the "Chencha," (the English version of a change-up) a slow-moving ball barely reaching the plate.

His inventory of pitches was unseen and unheard on this side of the Rio Grande. After the last out was made in a seven-inning game. He tossed a no-hit, no run game against the "Big boys of college baseball." A whistling fastball was something the "Varsity" could hit, but they did not get that from Mario.

Instead, he delivered an array of pitches that kept them guessing—inducing hitters to go "fishing," swinging wildly at pitches that were outside the strike zone. On this day, the would-be batboy displayed to his coaches and teammates, that his pitching was bigger than a "midget."

The next morning the "Daily Texan," the university newspaper, wrote the following: "There is a young Mexican on the freshman baseball team who can make the ball say Uncle, referring to Uncle Billy Disch." Mario went on to have an undefeated freshman season with a 6-0 record.

The first architect of the Longhorn baseball dynasty, "Billy Disch" took notice of his future star. Only one word of advice, in an era of prejudice, Disch would caution him, "not to speak Spanish" on road trips lest hotels and restaurants would refuse to serve him.

Under his tutelage, Mario blossomed with every pitch and was the first ball player from Mexico to earn a baseball scholarship at UT. Although he had secured a scholarship, he still had to work through college. The athletes of then were not spoiled and cuddled like the players of today. They had to earn their keep.

He was a three-year letterman in baseball and led the Longhorns to two Southwest Conference titles. Mario was selected to the All-

Southwest Conference team in 1931. The Austin American wrote, “De la Fuente cannot be kept off anybody’s All-Conference pitching staff. The boy from Del Rio will be the unanimous choice of all fair-minded scribes.”

In 1994, He was inducted in the UT Hall of Honor—a fitting tribute only bestowed to those that soared above the rest. When receiving the honor, he spoke, fighting back a flood of tears, about what the University meant to him. He expressed gratitude for the opportunity to play baseball in one of the most decorated colleges in the country.

He also mentioned how he was privileged to have worn the same uniform of the legendary Billy Disch—when few like him at the time, were part of the college baseball landscape. It was written that he was one of the greatness athletes in the University’s sports history.

New challenges . . .

After graduating from UT, he signed a professional baseball contract with the Texas League’s San Antonio Indians. Although he was given credit for breaking the color line there. Instead, it was Leo Najo, from Mission, Texas that was there first, debuting in 1924.

His stay in San Antonio was short. Mario goes back to Mexico and plays in the Mexican League, but his fame and fortune did not come from baseball. He flourished in the business world, first by buying two radio stations, and in 1954, he ventured into “Cable Television.” The first cable network was in Nogales and with time, his cables companies grew, and by the 1990s he had a monopoly in the cable television industry in Mexico. He was given credit as being the “Father of Cable television in Latin America.”

Always wanting to do more for his community, he dove into buying the old bullring in Nogales. The circular diamond became an immediate success attracting thousands of American tourists to his venue. Thus, improving the economy of Nogales to the point where it became known as the best tourist location in Northwest Mexico. His commitment to his community was legendary. Through his efforts and connections with baseball notables from this country, he brought professional baseball to Mexico.

His life transcended the ordinary. On the pitching mound, his was illuminating, and his deeds beyond the diamond, were inspirational. He



left behind a long list of community and humanitarian service to his name. His favorite motto was, “Work like a gringo and play like a Mexican.”

At the end of his colorful life, he was hailed as Mr. Beisbol of Sonora, Mexico’s Ambassador of “Good Will” to the U.S. and was recognized by the State of Arizona as the best Mexican friend of the United States.

As one of the first Mexicans to attend college in this country, he paved the way for succeeding generations of countrymen looking for an education in the United States. He died a “Longhorn Legend” in 2005, at the age of 95.

Note: Excerpts were taken from the Austin American, Arizona Daily Star, UT-Austin Website, Mario’s obituary, Omar Rivera’s research and from Mario’s book, “I like you Gringo, But.”



*First row—DISCH, PEEPLES, CARR, LEACH, SCOTT, Manager
 Second row—BASSETT, DE LA FUENTE, LAMM, REES, HIGGINS, RAILTON
 Third row—FORD, RHOADS, HUGHES, HOPKINS, WALKER, BROWNING*

FIGURES 1 and 2: Photos taken from UT-Austin yearbooks

Notes

1. RENE TORRES is a retired assistant professor from the University of Texas at Brownsville, and Texas Southmost College. He is known in the Rio Grande Valley as an avid sports historian, researcher, writer, and humanitarian. Rene has been inducted into the Rio Grande Valley Sports Hall of Fame, Laredo Latin American International Sports Hall of Fame, Leo Najo Baseball Hall of Fame, in Mission, Texas, and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Hall of Honor. His involvement in his community was knowledge nationally when he received the Jefferson Award for Public Service in Washington D.C.