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Ybor City and Baseball: An Interview with Al Lopez

Steven F. Lawson
University of South Florida

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If cigars are identified most prominently with Tampa, then baseball runs a close second. The success of Steve Garvey, Lou Piniella, and most recently the young phenomenon, Dwight Gooden, has focused national attention on Tampa’s baseball sandlots. Paving the way for these current heroes of the national pastime was Al Lopez. Enshrined in the Hall of Fame in 1977 after a distinguished major league career of forty-five years as a player and manager, Al Lopez still reigns as Tampa’s “Mr. Baseball.” Lopez belonged to the old school of ballplayers for whom the sport was not merely a livelihood or a business but was a game of youthful energy and relative innocence.

The skills and determination that Al Lopez displayed on major league diamonds grew from his upbringing in Ybor City. Born in 1908, Lopez spent a typical boyhood in Tampa’s Latin Quarter. His family was hard working, close knit and spoke Spanish at home. Not until Al was in the third or fourth grade did he learn to converse in English. In the days before Little League, Lopez developed his baseball proficiency playing for a local social club formed by a barber in Ybor City to compete against another club from West Tampa. At the age of sixteen, Al turned professional and signed a contract with the Tampa “Smokers,” a class “D” minor league team and forerunner of the modern-day “Tarpoms.” From there Al rose to the big leagues where he became a top-fielding catcher for the Brooklyn “Dodgers.” After stints with the Boston “Braves” and Pittsburgh “Pirates,” he hung up his cleats in 1948. During the 1950s, he returned to manage the Cleveland “Indians” and Chicago “White Sox” to American League pennants.

Had it not been for his talent in playing baseball, Al might have settled into a trade as a cigarmaker, like his father before him. Instead, baseball became his education and profession and introduced him to a world outside of Tampa. Although Lopez became “Americanized” and his job took him away from his native city, he has never forgotten his roots and makes his home in Tampa. The following interview provides a glimpse into Al Lopez’s world of Ybor City and its rich baseball tradition.

**Interview with Al Lopez**

**Q:** When were you born?

Lopez: Nineteen hundred and eight [1908].

**Q:** So you’re a native Tampan. But your parents came from. . .

Lopez: They were married in Spain, then they went to Cuba, and they had seven kids there. I was the eighth kid. I was born here. In 1906 the cigar industry started booming into Tampa.
They moved from Cuba and settled in Key West and for some reason or another they didn’t like it in Key West. I think it was on account of transportation or something.

Q: Did they follow the tobacco industry, the cigar industry?

Lopez: They were asking for workers to come down to move here. I guess they were offering him some kind of deal or something like that. My dad learned the trade in Cuba. He was what they call a selector. In those days it was all handmade cigars, and my dad had to pick out the leaves. They have these wrappers, they call them, they come in different sizes so naturally you’re not going to give the big size, a real good leaf, to a guy that’s making a cheroot or a small ten-cent cigar or five-cent cigar; so he would have to save that wrapper for the guy that was making the thirty or forty cent cigar. They all had tickets, and they had to come to him. He would select the size and the color and if it was a real good wrapper. A lot of them had a lot of mange, and they tried to keep people away from the mange. And that way they saved money because those wrappers were very expensive, and that was one of the most expensive parts of the tobacco, and that's the reason they had this trade.

Q: What year did your parents move here?

Lopez: 1906.

Q: He came with his wife and how many children at the time?

Lopez: No, he came by himself first to see how he was going to like it. At that time they were just starting. My mother stayed in Cuba with seven kids and one was just months old. And when he finally sent for us, she came over, was sick all the way in the boat and was lucky that my older sister was already old enough to be able to help her out with the kids, especially the young one.

Q: They took a boat from Cuba to Key West, and then how did they get from Key West to Tampa?

Lopez: The same way. The same boat made a stop in Key West and then to Tampa.

Q: When you were growing up, what kind of expectations do you think your family had about what you would do when you got older?

Lopez: I don’t know. My impression was that being that they were poor, that they never had expectations that I was going to be a college graduate or anything like that, they wanted me to get an education, you know, as far as I could go, and then after that they figured that I was going to have to go to work just like everybody else.

Q: How did your brothers and sisters fare?
Lopez: Well, my oldest sister, she had to leave school to help the family out. There were nine kids at the time. There were a couple of strikes in between in the tobacco industry. They had a couple of real bad strikes here, oh around 1913 I guess, 1912, something like that. And my oldest sister at that time was about fourteen and she had to go to work and then after that my brothers kept on following. She went to the factory, in fact, most of them went to the factory. I guess if I hadn’t been a ball player that I might have ended up in the factory also.

Q: How popular was baseball in Tampa?

Lopez: Oh, it was all we could do, there was nothing else. You know we didn’t have radio, TV, nothing like that, we just had to play baseball. We had a playground not too far from where I lived, and we used to go over there and stay there until about, I think the playground closed around 9:00, and we played basketball and what they call now diamond ball. I thought that was great. I was just growing up, and I could see my older brother competing at these type of games, and I wanted to do just as well or better than he did. To tell you the truth, I got interested in baseball in the 1920 World Series and so-and-so was rooting for this club and so-and-so was rooting for that club. It happened so that it was Brooklyn and Cleveland, they played in that World Series that year. I think that kind of started me off, you know, besides my brother. My brother was playing ball also and I started playing ball, and we started forming our own groups, our own baseball teams as kids.

Q: Could we follow how you started from children playing baseball, the sequence of events that you go through to get to the major leagues? You played in neighborhoods?

Lopez: There were no organized little leagues in those days. We used to have to form our own clubs. We didn’t have any money or anything like that to buy masks or chest protectors or shin guards. To me that was a joke. I got my nose busted a couple of times getting hit by foul balls, and we didn’t have any masks. We’d just go back to the plate and catch.

Q: How about balls and bats?

Lopez: Sometimes everybody would chip in a nickel or a dime or what ever they could to buy one ball, and that’s what we had-one ball, or else we’d put black tape around it after we’d hit for quite a while and play with that. We used to have to build our own diamonds. Any sandlot that we could we’d put a diamond there and we’d play in the neighborhood some place. We played ball between us kids and compete. I moved up, and a barber from Ybor City formed a team, and his wife made the uniforms for us. And there was a barber from West Tampa who made a team, and we had rivalries. And they both married sisters so there was a rivalry, they both thought that they were great managers. And they formed this team, and this guy approached me to come over and play for him.

Q: So you were being scouted by barbers?
Lopez: Probably, yeah. Anyway I guess I was getting pretty good because I was in demand a little bit, and this barber asked me if I’d catch for him and I said yeah, sure. You know, this was the first time I was ever going to wear a uniform. I thought this was great. So we ended up with a real good ball club. One guy was from West Tampa and this guy was from Ybor City. They had the darnedest arguments between those two guys because they were trying to beat each other all the time, and we were lucky enough that we were beating them.

Q: At that point, then, there were teams that were being sponsored by local business establishments in Ybor City and West Tampa.

Lopez: Well at that particular time there was already an intersocial league that used to play at McFarland Park in West Tampa, and there was four teams: the Italian club, the Spanish club, the Centro Asturiano, which is another Spanish club, and the Cuban club. There was no small competing. There was quite a rivalry because they were importing Cuban ball players from Cuba and Key West.

Q: But these weren’t really children.

Lopez: No, no, these were grown-ups. And they drew very well. They used to have those open streetcars in those days, and they would flock on those things and people would be hanging on these streetcars to go all the way from Ybor City to McFarland Park to watch these ballgames.

Q: Now were most of these, the kids that were playing, were they mostly Latin?

Lopez: Mostly, yes. They were mostly Latin kids. There were very few American kids who were born around that area there. I went to school at Ybor School. It’s still there, an elementary school. There was, I would say, five kids who were American kids, that spoke English in the yard. I didn’t learn how to speak, I didn’t talk, I didn’t speak English until I was in about the third or fourth grade. We always spoke Spanish. There was Italian kids that spoke Italian, and we picked up a little Italian.

Q: Did you have many Italian kids on the teams?

Lopez: Oh, yes. There were some Italian kids on the teams. In fact, they had their own team at one time.

Q: Getting back to the Italian Club, the Spanish Club, Centro Asturiano. The ball players on those clubs, did they tend to be of the nationality that the clubs represented?

Lopez: No, no, there were some Cuban fellows that were playing for the Italian Club because they didn't have enough Italian ball players. The Centro Asturiano had a pitcher who was an Italian boy that was good. They didn't care so much, it was just the contact that they could make, I guess.
Q: Would these clubs be something like semi-pro, in that category?

Lopez: Yes. They were pretty good clubs, these intersocial league clubs.

Q: Did they pay the players?

Lopez: No, they were not supposed to. They probably did under the table, but not on the payroll.

Q: Did you ever play for one of these clubs?

Lopez: I was going to play when it busted up. That year I was only, I think fifteen. Somebody asked me if I’d catch for the Cuban club.

In 1959, Lopez won the American League pennant with the Chicago “White Sox.” He is shown here with second base star Nelson Fox.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa Tribune Company.

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Q: Why did it bust up? Do you remember?

Lopez: They lost interest in the thing, and they were having a lot of fights between the clubs on account of the way the program was. They didn’t like for them to be importing ball players from Cuba and some from Key West, and they thought that they were getting paid because they weren’t going to come from Cuba. I think that was the thing, and I think the fans got a little bit tired of it. Well the intersocial league broke up. Some fellows in Ybor City formed a kind of a league of themselves, four clubs. I was surprised. One of the guys that was going to run one of the clubs, came over and asked me. I was going to junior high at the time, George Washington Junior High School, and he asked me if I’d catch for him. He was a pitcher on the team and he was going to run the team. These were grown men, to me they were old guys. They were probably twenty to thirty or something like that, but they were old guys—I was fifteen. My brother was playing on one of the teams, and I said I’d be glad to try out, but I said I don’t think I can catch for you guys, or against these fellows. These fellows are grown guys. They said, don’t worry about that, we want you to catch. So I played. We played two halves, and we played in the series, and I had a real hot series, everything that I hit just went. There was a Spanish newspaper man who used to write for the local Ybor City paper. He’d write sports, and he wanted me to go out and try out with the Tampa professional team. They called them the “Smokers” at the time, now they’re the “Tarpons.” We used to play our games in back of the University of Tampa at Plant Field. That’s the only stadium they had at the time. So again I told them, I don’t think I can make it, but, I said I’ll be glad to go out and try out. So he said, well I think you can do it, go on out and try it out. So I went out, and he told me to go see a fellow by the name of Doc Nance, who was running the club. He used to be a catcher also on the team. Real nice guy, he’s still living.

Q: Were the “Smokers” affiliated with any major league ball club?

Lopez: No, at that time all the clubs were independent. It was like it is now, they’re subsidized. The owner was a fellow by the name of Dr. Opre, I think he was a retired doctor, that was in 1925, who had a real estate office. This was during the first boom in Florida, it was a tremendous thing. And he had an office downtown close to the Hillsborough Hotel. I guess he went in to stir up more interest around, and he went into this baseball team, and he was a baseball fan, also. Doc Nance was really the guy that formed the team and ran the whole club. So they asked me to go see Doc Nance, and I went to see Doc Nance. It was at a . . . there used to be a poolroom and a cigar store on Franklin close to Twiggs and Franklin. I was supposed to meet Doc Nance, I think around five or six o’clock that afternoon. I went over to see him, told him who I was, gave him a slip of paper, and he said, oh yeah, I’ve been expecting you. He said, how much money do you want? I said Doc I don’t know anything about money or contracts or anything like this. At this time I’m sixteen. So he said how about $150.00 a month? I said that’s swell, real good. He said fine. So he just gave me a contract for $150.00 a month right there, and I signed it. I don’t know if it was legal or not because I was sixteen, but I signed it anyway.

Q: Did you play all year?
Lopez: No, they had two seasons. They had regular seasons that went on in the summertime. Like they have right now, I think their season is over in September. I played two years with them. The first year, I was sixteen when I signed. That year I didn’t hardly catch until the latter part of the season. I started catching some, and we played in the playoffs with St. Petersburg, and I had a good series that year. The following year I was the regular catcher, and then I was drafted by a higher classification of baseball. If you’re not sold you can only play two years in one league, then you’re subject to draft. So the Jacksonville team which had just started the year before drafted me to come up to Jacksonville.

Q: What levels were the teams?

Lopez: The “Tarpons” were class “D,” Jacksonville was “B.”

Q: When you were sixteen and started playing for the “Smokers,” did you have to quit school or could you still go to school?
Lopez: I quit school.

Q: *Let’s work back a little bit then. You say that you didn’t speak English until the fourth grade?*

Lopez: About the third or fourth grade.

Q: *So Spanish was spoken entirely in your house?*

Lopez: Yeah, it was spoken in the school yard. You wouldn’t dare speak English in the yard. Those kids would murder you. They thought you were high-hatting them or something like that.

Q: *Where did you live? Where was your house?*

Lopez: Over in Ybor City, not too far from the school. The school was on 14th and Columbus Drive, and I lived on 12th and 12th. So I lived about four or five blocks from school.

Q: *What language did you speak in school in the first, second, and third grades?*

Lopez: Spanish. You know, we learned, naturally, whatever we were taught, the alphabet and arithmetic, and we understood. In the third or fourth grades we really started speaking some English, but the rest of the time at home we spoke Spanish, on the yard we spoke Spanish, in the streets we spoke Spanish.

Q: *What about the teachers? Were they Latin or were they Anglo?*

Lopez: One or two were Spanish or Italian girls, but they spoke English. They wanted you to learn the English language which I thought was correct.

Q: *No bilingual education at that time?*

Lopez: No, in fact when I went to junior high, some of the kids had a preference between Spanish and Latin, and I wanted to take Spanish because I wanted it really for my own. It was easier for me, but at the same time I wanted to learn it grammatically. But they wouldn’t let us do it. They made the Spanish kids and Latin kids take Latin.

Q: *What was your family’s reaction to your quitting school and at sixteen going on to this path of playing baseball?*

Lopez: Well I guess they felt, you know, let him have a chance at this thing and if he doesn’t make it, he’s gonna have to go to work. The reason I quit school was to try to play ball, which I was just delighted to be able to do, and they were going to pay me to play ball. I thought that was terrific. And I said if I don't make it in baseball, I’m going to have to go get a job.
Q: Was the school you quit, Hillsborough High School?

Lopez: No. It was Jesuit. It used to be called Sacred Heart. I only played there one year. I went to George Washington, which is on Columbus Drive and still there. The coach at Sacred Heart was a friend of my brother’s who played baseball with him, and he had heard about me. So he asked my brother if I would come over and play for him and I played there one year. There was a little better competition. Sacred Heart was a high school, and where I was at junior high you were just getting junior high competition. I think it just advanced me a little bit by going to Sacred Heart.

Q: Was your family religious in any way that they would be happy that you went to a Catholic school?

Lopez: No. By this time they thought that I had what they called an education already. I was in the tenth grade at this time, and so they thought I had enough education. I guess if I’d insisted or if I’d been a brilliant student or something like that then they’d probably...
Q: What kind of a student were you?

Lopez: Just fair. I just tried to get by.

Q: After you learned to speak English did you still converse with your parents and your friends in Spanish? When would you normally use English during a day?

Lopez: When I was playing ball, you know, when I went into pro ball. I guess that at the beginning my English was broken English or something. There’s a few words you can notice your accent between Spanish and English. Then I married an Irish girl in New York and that was it, although I spoke to my mother in Spanish all the time.

Q: So, on a typical day of your life when you were ten years old or eleven years old, you wouldn’t have to speak English at all living here.

Lopez: No, not here living in Ybor City.

Q: When you were on the “Smokers,” was the team made up of people drawn from this area?

Lopez: No, no, they brought them from all over. In fact my first year that I was with the “Smokers” the team was supposed to have two rookies that never played pro ball, and they were supposed to have two classmen—ball players who played higher classification than “D” ball. So what happened was that we came up with some ball players who played within the junior league which was class “B,” and they changed some of the names. One guy changed his name from Schneider to Sneed, and things like that, because they wanted to get away. They wanted to have a good team, which we did. We finally ended up with a good team but they found out that they had too many classmen. We had four instead of two. Two were pitchers and so were the manager and the catcher. So they finally ended up keeping the pitchers. The catcher who was a classman, they let him go, and that’s when I got my break to start catching.

Q: Did you ever face, would you ever perceive yourself being discriminated because of your ethnic origins.

Lopez: No, they used to try to, you know like I guess they gave Jackie Robinson or some of those guys a little hard time. They used to call me a Cuban “nigger.” I’m not even Cuban, but they called me a Cuban “nigger” or something like that. But it was just, I thought, part of the game that they try to get under your skin, you know, competition, if you let it bother you same way as if you were up at the plate and they threw, you know, they threw under your chin or something like that to see if you’re going to scare or something like that. You can’t let that bother you.

Q: Did you have other Latin ball players on the “Smokers”?  

Lopez: Oh, yeah. We had a couple of Cuban boys, and we had a Cuban fellow that lived here in Tampa by the name of Alvarez. He had been with the “Smokers” for six or eight years before I even started. He was a pitcher.

Q: *So most of the players then were Anglo, American.*

Lopez: Yeah. American players. They brought them in from all over.

Q: *How did they get along here in Tampa, a city that had a heavy Latin population?*

Lopez: It’s just like every other city. I’ve noticed it in Cleveland. Wherever there’s a heavy population, in Cleveland there’s a Polish or Slavs, that there was a little resentment there, you know, one side against the other side. In Tampa there used to be a little resentment you know against the Latin population here. In Sulphur Springs, for instance. There were signs, “No Latins or dogs allowed to go swimming.” But, they never bothered me. Wherever I went, I don’t know, maybe it’s because I was lucky that I turned out to be a professional ball player or something like that. I was always welcomed and treated real nice and they never bothered me.

Q: *But on the team there was no problem... among groups?*

Lopez: No.

Q: *You said you played in Plant Field with the “Smokers.” How many people would be attracted to a “Smoker” game?*

Lopez: Oh, we’d draw. You’d be surprised. We’d draw, you know. At that time the cigarmakers were on what they call piece time. Whatever they made, that’s what they earned. The games started at 3:15, so by 2:30 they would leave the factory and come out and see the ball game. That was the only thing to see, baseball, you know, there was no television or nothing like that. And the people, the cigarmakers, were great. I think that was our greatest draw.

Q: *Were you something of a hero with the cigarmakers?*

Lopez: I finally got to be. I didn’t notice it because I was just one of the local guys and I lived in that area. I played around the clubs, played dominoes with them, cards and stuff like that, but I guess I was. I don’t know, I never noticed it, I never figured that I was a hero. I just figured that I was damn lucky to be where I got.

Q: *Was there any betting on these games?*

Lopez: Oh yeah, they bet like hell. They loved to bet. At that time gambling in Tampa was wide open. They had gambling houses, you could go in there, and they had roulette, dice, everything, just wide open. It was during prohibition, you could go to any of those Spanish restaurants. You’d want a bottle, I mean, a drink of Canadian Club. They’d put
the bottle of Canadian Club, you’d help yourself. A bottle of German beer, a dollar for a
bottle of beer, right on the counter. It was wide open. And gambling was, and prostitution
was controlled which I think would be better right now instead of having it all over the
streets the way they have it. It was controlled and you’d never see a prostitute down the
street in any place. They had their own sections.

Q: *Did you spend most of your social life, your social activities in Ybor City or did you
wander to what we call the downtown area now?*

Lopez: No, I spent it mostly around Ybor City. I think I had a very fine life, I wish I could do it
all over again.

Q: *What made it fine?*

Lopez: Well, at that time, we had four clubs, social clubs, in Ybor City and everybody knew
everybody and they had dances with shows. They had a dance every Saturday night,
matinees on Sunday. We got a bunch of us together, we’d go someplace, we’d buy a
bottle of whiskey for us, you know, and we’d have a bottle and we’d share it between us,
we’d all chip in to buy the bottle. We didn’t have to take a date or nothing like that.
You’d go there, and the girls would come with a chaperone, with their own group, sisters
or what, and we’d go there and pick out the girls you wanted to dance with. We’d dance
with them, take them out, do most anything you wanted to do, take them to a movie,
anything that you enjoyed doing. And I thought it was a great life. I think it was very
simple. You didn’t have to have any dates or nothing like that, you’d just go there, and if
you wanted to take a girl out you’d dance with her and ask her after the dance to go to a
matinee. You would end up at the Tampa Theater to see a movie, whoever was playing,
with a date. I thought it worked out real good.

Q: *Who did the “Smokers” play?*

Lopez: They were in the Florida State League. The same way as it is now, but we didn’t go that
far. There was Tampa, St. Pete, Lakeland, Sarasota, Orlando, Sanford, just teams like
that.

Q: *Did you travel by bus?*

Lopez: By car mostly.

Q: *How did you get to St. Pete before the Gandy Bridge was built in the mid-twenties?*

Lopez: You had to go all the way around. That bridge was built in ’23 or ’24, ’24 I think it was.
In ’25 we started already using the bridge.

Q: *Before the bridge you’d take a car. Give us a route, how would you go?*
Lopez: You’d have to go all around Clearwater, Largo, up in through there that way all the way around. It was about sixty miles and a terrible drive.

Q: *How long a drive would something like that be?*

Lopez: Oh, it must have been, it’d take you, I guess, a couple of hours because the road, they call it Memorial Highway, is still there and it was just a one-lane pavement. If the car was coming from the other direction, you would have to give him half the road. I never will forget that here you’re traveling at forty miles an hour, you were going fast, and you’d see this car coming, you’d have to kind of slow up and then just give him half the road and just keep right on going.

Q: *Did you get a travel allowance or anything of that type?*

Lopez: Oh, yeah. They gave you meal money and they furnished the car. They rented it or else individuals that had them, they’d furnish transportation. We’d go to Lakeland, we’d stay in Lakeland. It was a tough drive to go from here to Lakeland in those days. You’d go out to what they call Broadway now, and it’d take you through Mango, Seffner, Kissimmee, and then into Orlando, the other side of Lakeland. It was a tough ride.

Q: *How many people would show up at games when you went on the road?*

Lopez: We’d have 1,000, 1,500 people. But the prices were cheap. They were collecting, $1,000, probably a little more than that. And then they had the program to get by, they made money. And then at the end of the year they might get lucky, and if they break even during the season, they figure that if they sold one player that would be a profit. But I don’t see how they could’ve made money, because it was all day games, you know. There was no night baseball at that time.

Q: *How much did they charge admission to get into these baseball games with the “Smokers?”*

Lopez: I imagine a dollar, a dollar general admission, maybe the box seats were a dollar and a half or something like that because they did have box seats there at Plant Field. It’s a fairground, you know. It has a half a mile track.

Q: *There is a picture in the 1920s of what looks like the Washington Senators training in Plant Field.*

Lopez: I trained with them one year. This was right after I signed. In those days the clubs didn’t bring like they do now, ten to twelve catchers in spring training, because they had to have a lot of hitting practice and they have a lot of pitchers that they have to warm up. . .it’s quite a job. But in those days they only brought two or three catchers. The Washington club had three so they wanted a catcher just to catch batting practice and nothing else. They hit by the hour, those guys did. Four or five hours hitting. The year I was there Bucky Harris was the manager.
Q: How many other teams trained in the area at that time.

Lopez: There were quite a lot.

Q: Were the Reds here at that time?

Lopez: The Reds were in Orlando. Washington was in Tampa for oh, I don’t know, fifteen or so years.

Q: What about St. Pete?

Lopez: St. Pete had the Yankees and the Boston Braves. The Boston Braves were there first, and then they brought in the Yankees. At Clearwater was Brooklyn, at Bradenton was the Cardinals, at Sarasota the Giants were there for a little while, and then the Red Sox came in there for quite a while.
Q: When does this spring training phenomenon really take the shape of an organized enterprise?

Lopez: I think that the first time that any club came here to Tampa was in 1916, 1914 or 1916. I think the Cubs came down here and stayed at the Tampa Bay Hotel. The Washington club used to stay there, the Cincinnati club used to stay there at the Tampa Bay Hotel, which is Tampa University.

Q: People in the community, public relations people, chamber of commerce people, did they try to attract clubs here?

Lopez: Oh, yeah. They were tickled to death to get them here. They finally realized that it was a great help for tourism because at that time there were no dog tracks, no race tracks, and horse tracks, and baseball would draw some tourists out there, would help a lot. I think this has been a great help with the development of the state, baseball. People come down here to see what you got, they like it, well naturally they are going to plan on coming back.

Q: Did the teams back then, when you were doing the catching, the spring training, did they play organized games like they do now in the spring?

Lopez: Yeah, same thing. I used to go to, well they used to carry me wherever they went, because I used to catch batting practice for them, and they asked me if I’d go along. Well I remember going to Clearwater the first time I saw the Brooklyn club. They had a guy by the name of Zack Wheat that was a hell of a hitter, and I was really impressed with him. I think Casel Stengel was with them, but I didn’t even know who in the hell Casey Stengel was.

Q: Now what year did you catch with Washington?

Lopez: This was 1925.

Q: You were with the “Smokers” at the same time?

Lopez: Yeah. In fact, the owner of the Washington club was a man by the name of Clark Griffith. The trainer was a man by the name of Mike Martin. That Washington club, there’s a lot of family in the whole organization, it’s a family thing, and it was that same way. And Mike Martin was very well thought of, he was a trainer. Between him and somebody else, they recommended to Clark Griffith, why don’t we take that kid with us, he loves to play ball, he looks like he could make a catcher. So Griffith says, well if you like him, go ahead. So they found out that I had already signed a contract with the “Smokers” that year, and they went to the “Smokers.” They asked how much you want for that kid? They answered $5,000, no ten I think they wanted. He said are you crazy, he’s never had any baseball experience or nothing. I’ll give you a thousand dollars. So they turned him down. They said no.
As a Brooklyn “Dodger” in 1933, Lopez led National League catchers in fielding and batted .309.

Photograph courtesy of Al Lopez

Q: When you traveled around to places like Sanford, Lakeland, and St. Petersburg, what
was life like for you on the road? Here you were a Latin kid. . .

Lopez: Teenager. Luckily that fellow that I was talking about, I roomed with him for three years, a fellow by the name of Alvarez. He was an old man. He was about thirty-two, I think, he was thirty years old or something that. He’d been pitching quite a while, maybe twenty-eight something that. He and I were roommates. He spoke English, but, you know, English, like I did, I guess. We were roommates together. We’d go to kind of at night because they were all day games. Get up in the morning, have your breakfast, and then you go out to the ballpark and play your game. Then that night you come back to the hotel, have your dinner, and then you either go to a movie or something like that.

Q: Were you feeling as you went into organized sports and got away from Tampa, did you see yourself becoming more Americanized?
Lopez: Yes. And I liked it. I liked it. Not that I disliked the Spanish food. I still eat my wife’s caldo gallego which she learned to make. I don’t know if you ever had it or not, it’s real good soup. And she makes yellow rice and and Spanish dishes. We used to get up in the morning and just have a pot of coffee and a piece of bread and butter, that’s what we had at home, you know, we were brought up like that. Mostly boiled milk with coffee, style. But then I got to be on the road. We’d eat breakfast, not have lunch, and then eat dinner. At home we used to have coffee and bread and then we’d have a big lunch and then dinner at night, but it’s changed around and it was nice. I think it helped me a lot. . .start changing.

Q: You’ve been here now seventy-two years, what are the biggest changes you see with respect to sports, the kind of early youth you had when you can walk off a sandlot and almost become a major leaguer, with respect to sports and, I guess, with respect to the whole city, and the Latin community within the city?

Lopez: The Latin community is getting more Americanized all around with the exception now that the Cubans are coming in which has given it some more Latin atmosphere. My kid doesn’t speak Spanish, he understands Spanish. He’s married to a Spanish girl, and his kids don’t speak Spanish, which I wish they would. But, I don’t know, it’s easier for them to speak English because they’re brought up in an English neighborhood, an American neighborhood, and the mother speaks English to them. The reason we spoke Spanish is because my mother and dad spoke Spanish, and they spoke Spanish to us all the time. But I think they’re getting away, which I’m sad to see, it’s sad to see because I think it’s a great advantage if you could speak two or three or four languages. I’d like to see my grandson or my granddaughter speak Spanish, or another language.

Q: If it hadn’t been for baseball, do you have any idea what you might have wound up doing?

Lopez: No telling. I’d probably have ended up in the factory with the rest of my brothers. Learning a trade of some kind. I think I’ve been very very lucky. I thank baseball for it.