

One Love, Many Teams: A South Texas Baseball Romance

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Accepted: Fall 2025 / Published online: Spring 2026
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“Before I wrote my first song or stepped onto my first concert stage, I picked up a bat, spit on my hands, and took my place in the batter’s box at a little baseball field on the northeast side of Alice, America. That’s where my baseball romance started.”

The first time I fell in love, it was with a game.

Not a girl. Not a guitar, but a game.

I bought myself a wooden Louisville Slugger with my allowance and money I’d received in trade for trash bags full of crushed cans I’d collected. I walked into Wright’s Sporting Goods at the Sagewood Mall in Alice, Texas, handed over my entire life savings with sweaty palms, and walked out holding the weight of a thousand dreams.

I had one year of Pee Wee League under my belt and was now playing for the Kiwanis of the Alice American League. My number 14 jersey was too big. My cap never fit right. But when I gripped that bat and stared down the pitcher, I wasn’t just a kid anymore. I was a ballplayer.

“Baseball doesn’t ask who you are. It shows you.”

That summer lit the fire. But it was my Dad who kept it burning. He took my mom and me to see the Astros play the Padres inside the mighty Astrodome. I don’t remember the score, but I remember the way the lights hit the turf like a miracle. The hush before the pitch. The sudden roar. The crazy bull and six-shooter cowboy going crazy on the scoreboard. The way time stretched and bent with every ball in flight.

Sometime later, my Tío Sal and Tía Delia loaded up the cousins and took Mom and me back for a doubleheader against the Montreal Expos. José Cruz was in the outfield. With rainbow stripes on his jersey, swinging smooth as silk in the batter’s box, I watched him with wide eyes and a burning heart as something inside me clicked. And somewhere along the way, my mom became the Astros’ biggest fan, watching every game religiously, as if every pitch and every play were part of her own story, too.

This was it. This was the game.

From that moment forward, baseball was more than a sport. It was a compass. And it pointed everywhere.

“In South Texas, we don’t inherit teams. We earn them. Through memories, blood, pride, and the stories we tell around a fire pit of burning mesquite.”

Growing up in South Texas, we didn’t just idolize the big-league superstars on TV. We had our own local legends to look up to. Bobby Cuellar, who pitched briefly for the Texas Rangers in 1977 before becoming one of the most respected pitching coaches in Major League Baseball, was one of those legends. After a long grind through the minors, Cuellar reached the big leagues as a player, but it was in coaching that he made his lasting

mark, guiding pitchers for the Mariners, Expos, Dodgers, Twins, Pirates and more. He helped shape the careers of Cy Young winners like Johan Santana and was known across the league for his baseball IQ and calm presence on the mound. He was from my neck of the woods, and every one of us kids knew his name. On dusty sandlots and patchy baseball fields, we'd mimic his windup and shout his name after a strikeout. It didn't matter that most people around the country didn't know who he was. Around here, Bobby Cuellar was as big as Jackie Robinson.

The Astros were my first love. But then came Fernando Mania.

Fernando Valenzuela. El Toro. Eyes to the sky, fire in his windup. A son of Mexico who made Chavez Ravine feel like the center of the universe. I watched from dusty South Texas backroads as he took over the world in Dodger blue, and suddenly, I was cheering for LA like I had family in Long Beach.

And maybe I did. Maybe we all did.

The Rangers followed. Of course, they did. Nolan Ryan in Arlington wasn't just pitching. He was thunder in a uniform and played for one of my favorite teams. We couldn't even pass through Refugio without my neck craning to try and spot the hospital or house where he was born. Every time we saw that billboard dedicated to Nolan welcoming us to Refugio, I'd press my face to the window, hoping for a glimpse of where greatness began.

To no one's surprise, I was also an avid baseball card collector, and I still am. Those early packs of Topps, Donruss, and Fleer were like gold. I'd rip them open with the care of a surgeon and the excitement of a kid on Christmas morning. I can still smell and taste the gratuitous stick of gum they included in each pack that often felt like I was chewing on a piece of bubble gum-flavored brittle plastic. I loved it. I remember my Dad buying me about a dozen packs to add to my collection at a Diamond Shamrock gas station in Mathis, Texas. For some reason, those packs were stacked with Texas Rangers, which I welcomed. It also felt like someone up there was trying to make me a Blue Jays fan because those cards came in a close second in all those packs. Maybe they knew how close I lived to Jim Acker's hometown of Freer, Texas. Who knows?

Then came the Red Sox.

On a summer road trip out west with my fam, My Tío Gil told me about Ted Williams, the Splendid Splinter, the Thumper, the Kid. He was a legend. I thought he belonged only to Boston until I learned his mother was Mexican and that she'd grown up in El Paso. I stood in the Arizona sun that day, stunned, when something shifted in me. I wasn't just rooting for players anymore. I was rooting for heritage. For identity. For pieces of myself scattered across ballparks I'd never been to.

Roger Clemens wore burnt orange and repped the Longhorns before he wore Boston red. That mattered. My Tio Gil and my wife's Grandpa Diaz were pursued to play ball for the Red Sox. That mattered.

And then came Jeter. Smooth as gospel. He was a shortstop who moved like he already knew the ending. I thought I loved the Yankees then but along came José Trevino in pinstripes.

José wasn't from the Bronx. He was from Ben Bolt. From Green Acres. He was our neighbor from the same fields, fences, and farm-to-market roads as the rest of us.

He was the kid who went from backstops on dusty diamonds in Jim Wells and Nueces County to the show. He didn't just wear the uniform. He carried every South Texas dreamer like me with him.

"When Trevi made the majors, we didn't cry because we were surprised. We cried because, like his Mom and Dad, and Coach Steve Castillo, we knew that's exactly where he belonged."

Whether it was Frisco, Arlington, Yankee Stadium, or now with the Cincinnati Reds, our ranch community tunes in every time he's crouched behind the plate. It feels like our own brother is calling pitches under the lights. You don't just cheer for him. You feel it- deep in the marrow.

I loved the Reds and Tigers because my cousin Roel had their pennants on his bedroom wall. I rooted for the Tigers even more when they drafted my buddy Jordan John. I became a Braves fan not because I chose them but

because they interrupted my cartoons on TBS. I watched them with a side-eye, but the game's rhythm pulled me in over time. It didn't hurt that Brownsville's Charlie Vaughan played for them back in the day. Years later, my cousin Melva and my buddy Kris Campos would remind me why I loved them so much. Braves baseball is a religion to them. Their devotion pulled me back.

That spark never died.

Same with the Cubs. WGN was always on when I visited my cousin Wimpy all those summers in Donna, Texas. You either learned to love the Cubs or learned to go outside. I chose to listen to Harry Caray's play-by-play.

Years later came Brooks Kieschnick. A Texas Longhorn legend I met in college thanks to my fraternity brothers Aaron Perales and Rene Obregon. We were all undergrads at UT and got to hang out several times. He was magnetic, humble, and larger than life on the Forty Acres. When he got to Chicago, I was already a fan.

I rooted for the Phillies when my buddy Ryan Duke from Calallen got drafted and played in Reading. I pulled for the Angels when I discovered they were the first Major League team owned by a Mexican American, Arturo Moreno. That meant something. Still does.

And I'll never forget those nights playing country shows after Hooks games in Corpus Christi. Whataburger Field would still be glowing, and the smell of my favorite burger, fries, and saltwater lingered in the air. I'd play Brewster Street Icehouse and look out from center stage. Sometimes, Springer was there. Sometimes Correa or Bregman. Altuve too.

They weren't just future big leaguers. They were kids with big dreams, blending into the crowd, throwing back a few, and singing along. We laughed. Talked shop. Had a few. Then they went off and made history.

"They drank with us before they danced with destiny."

Over the years, my fraternity brothers gave me grief, "Pick one team," Rudy Garza would say. "You can't cheer for everybody." But Rudy didn't understand my reason why. None of them did, really.

I didn't pick a team. I picked a life.

I picked the crack of the bat and the roar of the crowd. I picked heartbreak and rally caps. I picked road trips to ballparks, cheap seats, box scores, sunflower seeds, and the low hum of a ballgame on the radio as I fell asleep.

Baseball is not about loyalty to a logo. It's about loving something that lives in you, something made of memory and miracle, something that turns the toughest men into misty-eyed storytellers.

"You don't pick baseball. Baseball picks you. Then it never lets go."

On Opening Day 2025, I had the Astros and Mets on the big screen. But don't think for a second I wasn't keeping an eye on the Reds-Giants game, watching Trevino crouch behind the plate, living out the dream every South Texas kid has ever dared to chase.

When he flashed signs to the pitcher, I was leaning in. Because he's from where I'm from. And so is the game.

And now, with every passing season, I find new reasons to fall in love with this game all over again. South Texas has always punched above its weight when it comes to baseball talent. Anthony Banda from Sinton takes the mound for the Dodgers. Blake Mitchell, another Sinton standout, is rising fast with the Royals, right alongside Corpus Christi Ray alum Nick Loftin. David Freese, born in Corpus, gave the Cardinals their October magic. Mike Adams from Sinton and Mike Gonzalez from Robstown repped our region with the Rangers. Jaime Garcia and Tres Barrera, both from Mission Sharyland, brought pride to the Cardinals and Nationals. And just like Bobby Cuellar, we had another hometown hero in Oscar Resendez, a pitcher drafted by the Cleveland Indians who called Jim Wells County home like me. One by one, South Texas names keep finding their way onto big league scorecards and into the corners of my heart.

This place I call home keeps producing ballplayers, reminding us all that greatness can grow from caliche and

mesquite trees. So maybe it's no surprise that I've got a little piece of loyalty tucked away in almost every dugout. Because every time a kid from our part of the world makes it to the show, I don't just cheer.

I remember the boy I was.

The oversized Kiwanis jersey.

The bat in my hands.

The cards in my pocket.

The dream in my chest.

And I thank this game with all my heart for never letting go.