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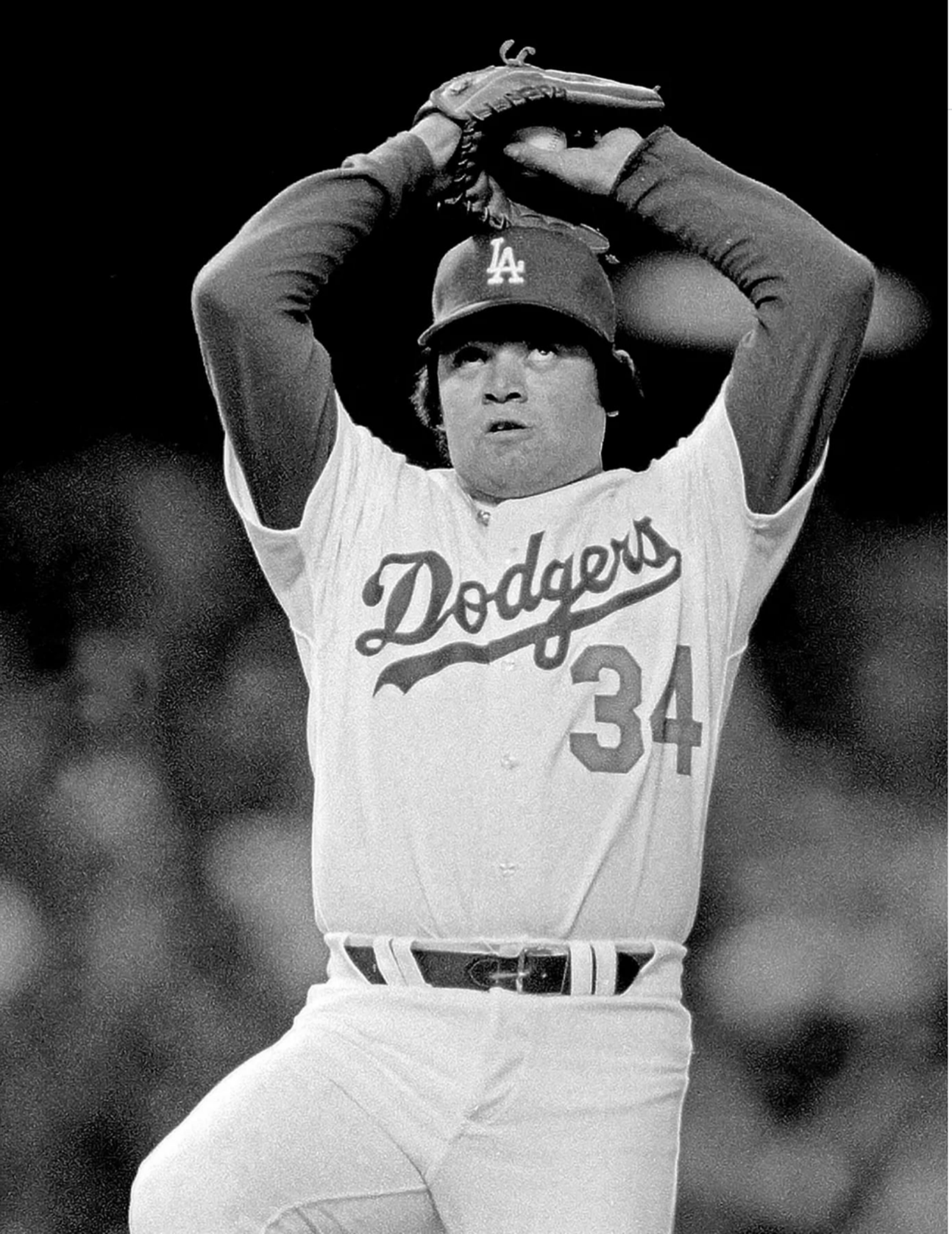
## Fernando Valenzuela

# El Toro that was the face of baseball in the 80s




## *MUCH MORE THAN NUMBERS:*

# FERNANDO VALENZUELA

## *IS JOY, VIRTUOSITY, UNITY AND RECONCILIATION IN LOS ANGELES*

**Por: César González Gómez**

**Fernando Valenzuela is joy, he is phenomenal, he is virtuosity, but he is also the smiling face that gave a sense of belonging to an entire community of Mexican immigrants. Far from his country of origin, Fernando gave them a symbolic home, he gave them a homeland.**

Fernando Valenzuela is unity. He brought together two sides that were estranged, so that they could embrace each other and coexist within the same community. There was room for everyone in Fernando's hug.

Fernando is reconciliation in Los Angeles. He is the acceptance of the tragedy of Chavez Ravine, that place that was home to hundreds of Mexican families who were evicted—some by force—with the old trick of a unfulfilled promise. Their homes were razed by bulldozers. Not to build them a new home, but a baseball stadium, Dodger Stadium.

In 1981, at the height of his pitching career, Fernando took the mound at that stadium and sprinkled it with his magic. And in the end, something blossomed there. Mexicans put aside their grievances and made a pilgrimage to Dodger Stadium to see someone like them succeed. Those were the victories of someone who looked like them, who spoke like them. And just like them, he also came from a tiny, dusty, town with an indecipherable name that the day before had not even appeared on a map.

Eric Nusbaum wrote a book, Stealing Home: Los Angeles, the Dodgers, and the Lives Caught in Between, which is a detailed chronicle of the tragedy suffered by the Mexican community in Chávez Ravine due to the construction of the stadium.

In the early years after his arrival in Los Angeles, Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley was looking for ways to ingratiate himself with


**The Los Ángeles Dodgers finally retired Valenzuela's number.**

the Mexican public. He began broadcasting Dodgers games in Spanish, and narrator Jaime Jarrín even recalls O’Malley asking him, half-jokingly and half-seriously, when he would help him find a Mexican Sandy Koufax.

As if by a twist of fate, Walter O’Malley died in August 1979, just one month after the Dodgers signed Fernando Valenzuela. He never saw his Mexican Sandy Koufax.

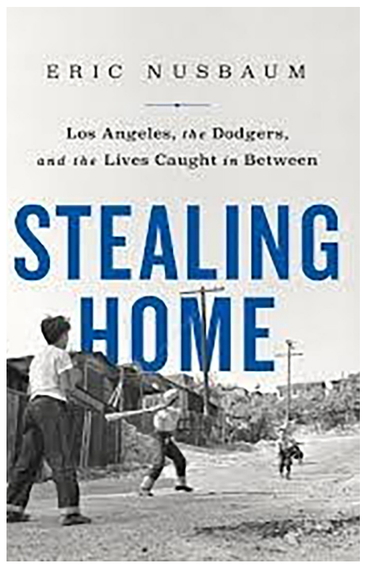
For Eric Nusbaum, what Fernando Valenzuela generated in the city, in his community, and for the Dodgers transcended everything.

“Fernando Valenzuela was the pitcher who became much more than the Mexican Sandy Koufax that Walter O’Malley dreamed of signing,” writes Nusbaum. “Valenzuela, a shy and bewildering left-hander from a small town in Sonora, did more than anyone else to make O’Malley’s dreams for his stadium a reality: that it would always be full and fun, and that no matter what happened on the field, it would be a place for true civic communion. In the 1980s, Dodger Stadium became Valenzuela’s stage. He elevated the franchise, the sport, and the city, and then transcended all of that.”

Chávez Ravine was an area of just over 300 acres near downtown Los Angeles. And that was where Mexican immigrants came to live, a place that nobody else wanted. Three Mexican expatriate neighborhoods would be born in Chávez Ravine: La Loma, Palo Verde, and Bishop. It was estimated to be home to 4,000 people, most of whom lived in extremely poor conditions. Only a third of the homes had bathrooms, and many did not have running water or a formal drainage system.

The tragedy of Chávez Ravine, we said, began with a unfulfilled promise.

In 1949, a project was launched to build 13 apartment towers on


the site, equivalent to 10,000 public housing units that would accommodate some 17,000 people.

Those who lived in Chávez Ravine were promised that if they agreed to sell their land to the government for the construction of the project, they would have the preferential right to purchase an apartment at a fair market price.

The promise was the only option given to the residents of Chávez Ravine, who knew that if they did not sell their land, it would be confiscated by the government. They would be forcibly evicted and their homes would be demolished to make way for the towers.

Many began selling in late 1950, but others refused and offered resistance to the bitter end, however painful it might be.

That public housing project



## VALENZUELA, THE MOST PROFITABLE PITCHER IN BASEBALL HISTORY

**From 1980 to 1990, Fernando Valenzuela pitched in front of more fans than any other Major League pitcher, despite missing six weeks due to injury in 1988 and making only two starts in 1980. Paid attendance per pitcher from 1980 to 1990:**

| | |
|---|---|
| **1.- Fernando Valenzuela** | **12,945,716** |
| 2.- Nolan Ryan | 10,867.110 |
| 3.- Bob Welch | 10,114.515 |
| 4.- Jack Morris | 10.096,435 |
| 5.- Dave Stieb | 10,005,851 |
| 6.- Jim Clancy ` | 9,337.210 |
| 7.- Mike Scott | 9,250,004 |
| 8.- Frank Tanana | 8,433,810 |
| 9.- Charlie Hough | 7,681,118 |
| 10.- Bob Knepper | 7,432,642 |

**Fernando averaged nearly 40,000 people per game. It is a unique figure in history for an entire decade—truly unmatched. All of these games were with the LAD. He started 320 games, winning 141 of them, with 29 shutouts, including a no-hitter. He has been one of the most important financial assets in MLB history. No team has ever had a more box-office-drawing pitcher. As a player, only Babe Ruth offers a point of comparison—no one else. As a pitcher, in tickets sold, fans in the ballparks, and television audiences, Valenzuela can be considered the most profitable in history.**

in Chavez Ravine took a turn in 1953. Fletcher Brown, the mayor who was promoting the project, failed to win reelection. His rival, Norris Poulson, took advantage of the anti-communist phobia that prevailed in large sectors of American politics in those years to ingratiate himself with voters.

And within that anti-communist phobia, subsidizing housing was considered part of a socialist plan. Upon winning, Poulson vetoed the project.

By then, most of the Mexican families in Chavez Ravine had already sold their land in exchange for a promise that would remain broken. And if it was a tragedy for them, it would be even more so for the families who resisted selling.

The land remained as a government property and without a specific use. It was then that the local government began to offer the land in Chavez Ravine to Walter O’Malley, the owner of the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team. O’Malley’s attempts to build a new stadium in New York had failed, and he was considering moving his team to the other coast of the United States.

The offer from the Los Angeles mayor’s office was tempting: the land for the construction of a new baseball stadium and a government investment of $3 million to improve the infrastructure of the site.

O’Malley sold the Dodgers’ home in Brooklyn, Ebbetts Field. He then secured another key deal, trading his minor league franchise in Fort Worth for the Los Angeles farm team, including the stadium. O’Malley would donate that Los Angeles stadium to the city as a symbolic payment for the ground in Chavez Ravine.

In October 1957, the city of Los Angeles approved the transfer of the land to the Dodgers for use in building the new stadium.

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The initial project had been completely distorted. The idea of building decent and affordable public housing for low-income families, many of them of Mexican origin, had turned into the transfer of all that land to a private owner for profit.

The Dodgers would move from Brooklyn to Los Angeles at the end of the 1957 season to play temporarily at the Memorial Coliseum while the new stadium was being built.

Meanwhile, in March 1959, the last families resisting in their homes were informed that if they did not vacate voluntarily, they would be removed by force. And so it happened.

On May 8, 1959, the Aréchigas, the last family remaining in Chávez Ravine, were forcibly evicted from the wooden house they had built almost 40 years earlier, shortly after arriving in the United States from Zacatecas, Mexico. The media filmed the scene. The family members, crying on the ground with their babies in their arms, watch as their belongings are removed from their home, which is then demolished by heavy machinery.

A few days before the forced eviction, Manuel Aréchiga, the patriarch of the family, had sent a message intended for Walter O’Malley.

“I have nothing against the Dodgers, but if they want my property, let them pay a reasonable price for it. Don’t just take it away from me,” Manuel pleaded.

### THE RESPONSE NEVER CAME.

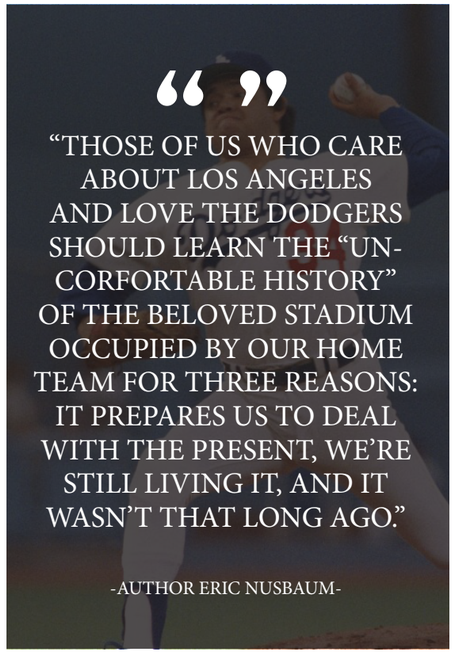
The Aréchigas were removed from their property. One of the daughters had to be carried out of her home, crying inconsolably. The scene would become the symbol of the pain upon which Dodger Stadium was built.

In September 1959, almost four months after the eviction, ground was broken for the new stadium, which would take three years to build and be inaugurated in 1962.

The new stadium, modern and custom-built, was the success Walter O’Malley had dreamed of. In its first year of operation, Dodger Stadium attracted 2.7 million fans, thanks to its capacity of 56,000. The Los Angeles Dodgers began a honeymoon period in their new stadium, winning three World Series.

But the Mexicans living in Los Angeles never forgot the scene on which Dodger Stadium was built. The image of the Aréchigas’ suffering was etched in the memory of the Mexican community.

Walter O’Malley knew how important it was for the Dodgers to appeal to Mexicans in Los Angeles, which is why he talked about finding a Mexican Sandy Koufax and broadcasting games in Spanish. But even the closest thing to a Mexican Sandy Koufax didn’t work. Vicente Romo and José Peña, legendary Mexican pitchers, were unable to make a lasting impression with the Dodgers.




### MEXICAN FANS STAYED AWAY. UNTIL FERNANDOMANIA ARRIVED IN 1981.

Only 22 years had passed since the evictions in Chávez Ravine and the meteoric rise of Fernando Valenzuela. Not much time to forget an indignity. But Fernando was irresistible to his aggrieved compatriots.

He seduced them because he was like them, because he looked like them, because he spoke like them. He was dark-skinned, of indigenous appearance of the Mayo tribe, somewhat chubby, did not speak English, and came from a small rural village in Mexico that probably did not even appear on the map. He was one of them.

**Nancy Reagan, José López Portillo, President of Mexico, Ronald Reagan, President of the U.S., and Fernando “El Toro” Valenzuela.**

In 1981, more than two million people of Mexican origin lived in Los Angeles. On the entire planet, only Mexico City had as many Mexicans in one place.

Fernando’s first months as a Los Angeles Dodger in 1980 were remarkable, acting primarily as a reliever where he did not receive an earned run.

But what would happen the following year, in 1981, would go beyond sports. He became a social phenomenon. It was the story of a Mexican athlete vindicating his compatriots.

At the start of the 1981 season, Fernando Valenzuela was racking up zero after zero, win after win. The numbers are etched in the memory of every Mexican baseball fan. They are recited over and over again. Fernando Valenzuela won his first eight consecutive starts, five of them by shutout, completing all of them.

Sports Illustrated summed it up perfectly on its cover: “Unreal.”

He won the Rookie of the Year award, the Cy Young award, and the Dodgers won the World Series that year.

And with Fernando at the helm, the Dodgers won over Mexico. Mexican fans didn’t go to Dodger Stadium to see Fernando Valenzuela’s precocious mastery. No, they also went to see him, so they could prove to themselves that a Mexican immigrant could succeed, could be talented, could have an honest job, and could build a new reality that he hadn’t found in his own country.

### THE MEXICAN AMERICAN DREAM, NOT LESS.

Fernando empowered that migrant community, and he did so with the frugality of a quiet man, without any luxury, without any jewelry, without any scandals, without cheating. Like the Mexican migrant who arrives in another country, he only had his own job to speak for him.

In 1981, Fernando Valenzuela was the face of Major League Baseball. He was one of the last faces of baseball in the age of innocence. It was his affable and naive smile that attracted everyone like a magnet. Without intending to, Fernando was a gravitational force that united Americans and Mexicans in Los Angeles.

The evictions from Chavez Ravine will never be forgotten, but at last there was some reconciliation in that place. Fernando had built them a new home.

Nusbaum perfectly describes what Fernando Valenzuela represented for that story. Redemption for everyone, except for those who experienced the wound firsthand.

“Valenzuela became more than just a brilliant and charismatic pitcher. He became a phenomenon and then a symbol,“ Nusbaum describes. ”For some, Fernandomania was the happy ending that the story of Palo Verde, La Loma, and Bishop needed. As if the mere fact that Fernando brought Mexican fans to the stadium erased the scars and made them disappear as if by magic. But that was not the case. No matter how much the city loves its baseball team or its stadium, those scars could not disappear. Baseball may have mystical powers, but it cannot erase the past. It cannot redeem us. The beauty of Dodger Stadium is enormous, it is collective. It belongs to everyone. But the pain suffered by the people of Palo Verde, La Loma, and Bishop was something specific. It was theirs.”

Fernando said that no one ever told him what happened in

Chavez Ravine to build the stadium. There was no need. Fernando came to do his thing with the same naturality as a lightning that strikes where it has to strike.

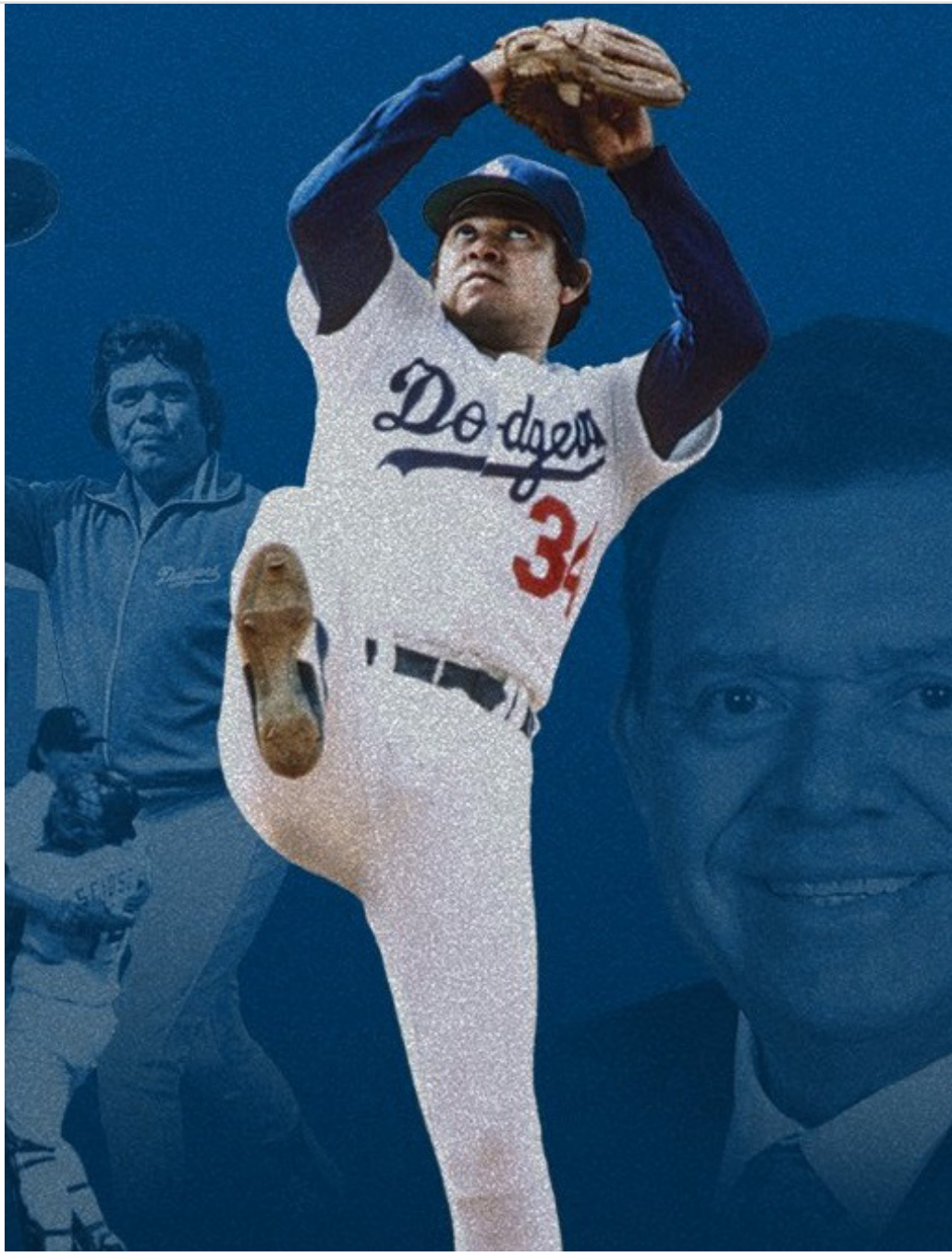
For decades, the Los Angeles Dodgers had resisted retiring Fernando Valenzuela's number 34.

Although the Los Angeles team has 11 retired numbers, they all have something in common that Valenzuela did not: they were Cooperstown members. On Saturday, February 4, 2023, the Los Angeles Dodgers announced that they would finally retire the number of that great Mexican who came from an unpronounceable town: Etchohuaquila.

The Dodgers understood that Fernando is much more than numbers. Valenzuela is a symbol of unity, brotherhood, and reconciliation. Fernando united races, ethnicities, and communities. Fernando reconciled the Mexican community with the Dodgers, with Dodger Stadium, with the city.

Fernando Valenzuela is the face of the best immigrants, those who are clean, honest, hardworking, and talented. Those who, quiet like him, carry the weight of leaving their homes, traveling thousands of miles, and starting over.

Just like him. Just like them.




## BIOGRAPHY

**Fernando "El Toro" Valenzuela is one of the most iconic pitchers in Major League Baseball history. Born in Navojoa, Sonora, Mexico, he rose from humble beginnings to become a global sensation with the Los Angeles Dodgers. His unforgettable 1981 rookie season sparked "Fernandomania," as fans were mesmerized by his unique windup, calm intensity, and dominant screwball. That year, he made history by winning both the Rookie of the Year and Cy Young Awards, a rare achievement. Throughout his career, Valenzuela became a symbol of pride for the Mexican and Latino communities, breaking cultural barriers and expanding baseball's reach. He earned six All-Star selections, helped lead the Dodgers to a World Series title, and inspired generations of young players. Beyond his achievements, he remains a beloved figure for his humility, work ethic, and lasting impact on the sport.**