

It is an absolute privilege to be with you today. Today, I want to take you on a journey that spans over 4,500 kilometers—from the vibrant city of Barquisimeto in Lara State, Venezuela, to the Rogers Centre here in Ontario.

When we look back at the history of the Toronto Blue Jays, particularly the era that built the foundation for back-to-back World Series championships in 1992 and 1993, we often talk about farm systems, trades, and draft picks. But there is a crucial, international chapter of that story that is rarely told in full: the deep, symbiotic, and historic relationship between Cardenales de Lara of the Venezuelan Professional Baseball League and the Toronto Blue Jays.

Over the next few minutes, we will look at how a partnership forged in personal trust became what many consider the strongest working relationship between a Major League franchise and a Winter League club in baseball history. Let’s begin with where this deep Venezuelan baseball tradition started.

To understand the connection between Toronto and Barquisimeto, we first have to step back to 1945.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT & ROOTS

1945 American All-Stars & The Birth of the LVBP

- 1945 American All-Stars in Caracas: Historic Negro League tour featuring Hall of Famers Jackie Robinson (front row, left) and Roy Campanella (back row) alongside Buck Leonard and Sam Jethroe.
- 1946 LVBP Creation: The immense popularity of the 1945 tour spurred the founding of the Venezuelan Professional League by Vargas, Caracas, Venezuela, and Magallanes.
- 1965 Cardenales Debut: Cardenales de Lara (founded in 1944 in Carora) officially joined the LVBP in October 1965.



As you can see in this remarkable historic photograph from October 1945 in Caracas, an American All-Star team composed of Negro League legends toured Venezuela. In the front row on the left, you see a young Jackie Robinson—just two years before breaking the Major League colour barrier—alongside Hall of Famers like Roy Campanella and Buck Leonard.

The overwhelming enthusiasm generated by this 1945 tour was the direct catalyst for the official founding of the Liga Venezolana de Béisbol Profesional (LVBP) in January 1946 by four original teams: Vargas, Cervecería Caracas, Venezuela, and Magallanes. Incidentally, most of the American All-Star Team stayed in Venezuela and played in the first season of the LVBP.

Cardenales de Lara was originally formed in Carora in 1944. After competing in local circuits, Cardenales officially entered the LVBP in October 1965 for the 1965–1966 season, establishing Barquisimeto as one of Latin America's most passionate baseball capitals. This rich winter baseball environment soon became an essential proving ground for Major League talent.

The LVBP did not exist in a vacuum. It was a cornerstone of the prestigious Caribbean Winter League circuit alongside leagues in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Cuba.

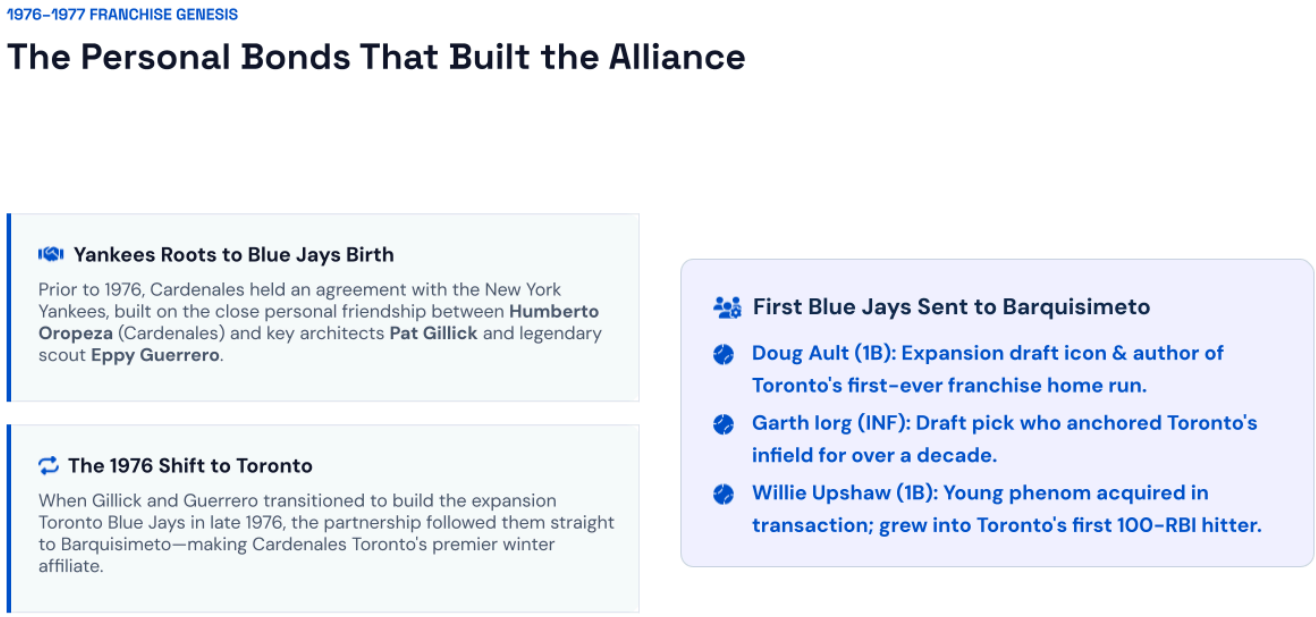
In the 1970s and 1980s, winter ball served two key purposes for North American baseball. First, it offered both established and young American and Canadian major league players a way to earn extra off-season income or gain valuable game experience.



Second, for Major League organizations like Toronto, it was a high-intensity pressure cooker. Playing in front of 15,000 passionate, vocal fans in Barquisimeto, where every pitch mattered, taught how to play in playoff-like environments. It matured players far faster than any other options ever could.

Prior to 1976, Cardenales de Lara actually had a formal working agreement with the New York Yankees. But in baseball, institutional relationships are built on human relationships. That alliance was rooted in the close friendship between Cardenales owner Humberto Oropeza, legendary Blue Jays executive Pat Gillick, and pioneer Latin American scout Epy Guerrero. When Gillick and Guerrero left the Yankees in 1976 to launch the expansion Toronto Blue Jays franchise, that

bond of trust traveled directly with them to Toronto. Cardenales shifted their working agreement to the Blue Jays, establishing an immediate pipeline.



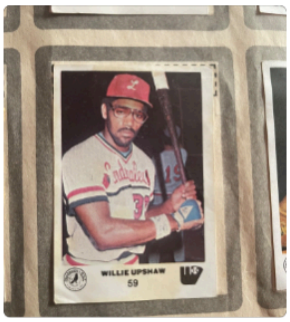
Right out of the gate, Toronto sent top talent to Lara: Doug Ault, who hit Toronto's first-ever franchise home run on April 7, 1977; Garth Iorg; and a young prospect acquired in a transaction named Willie Upshaw. The partnership was officially born.

To truly appreciate this bond, consider these original Venezuelan sticker album cards from my personal collection. Here you see four Toronto Blue Jays players wearing the authentic Cardenales de Lara uniform:

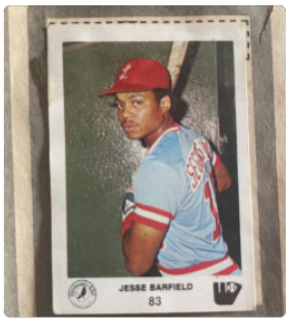
- Willie Upshaw (#59), who refined his hitting approach in Barquisimeto before becoming Toronto’s very first 100-RBI hitter in 1983.
- Jesse Barfield (#83), who sharpened his power stroke and legendary outfield arm in Lara. Jesse’s son Josh, who also reached the major leagues, was born in Barquisimeto.
- Lloyd Moseby (#72), who developed the speed, discipline, and leadership that made him an All-Star center fielder.
- Geno Petralli (#85), gaining critical defensive catching reps under winter league pressure.

AN UNPRECEDENTED ALLIANCE

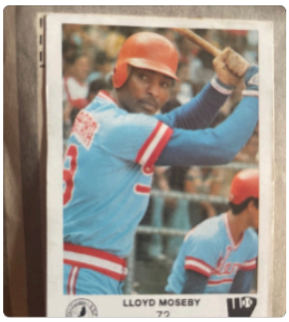
The Strongest MLB–Winter League Relationship in History



Willie Upshaw
1B • Cardenales #59



Jesse Barfield
OF • Cardenales #83



Lloyd Moseby
OF • Cardenales #72



Gino Petralli
C • Cardenales #85

Historical Evidence: Original Venezuelan sticker album cards from personal collection showing future Toronto Blue Jays stars during their winter seasons with Cardenales de Lara in Barquisimeto.

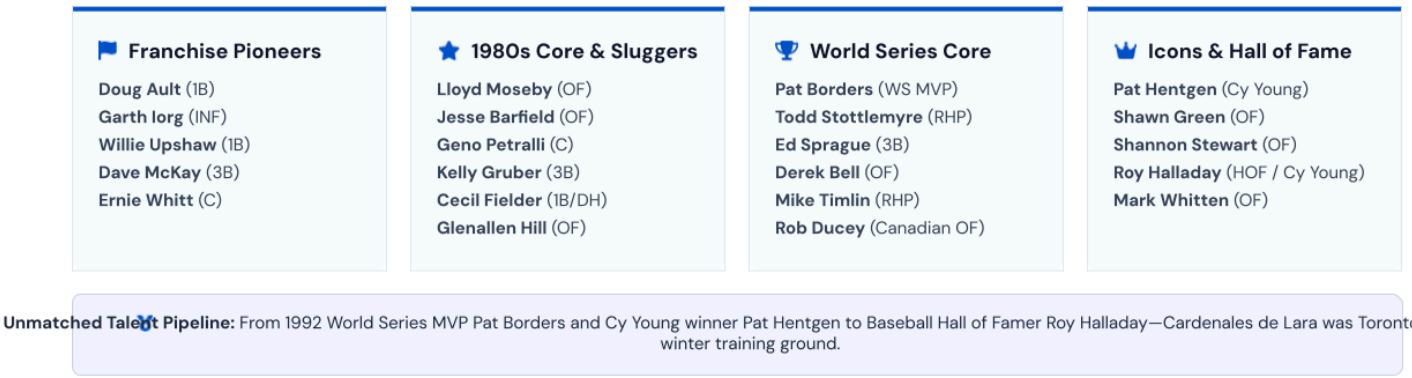
Fans in Barquisimeto cheered these Blue Jays heroes in red and white, while Canadian fans cheered the same players in baby blue.

The sheer volume of Blue Jays talent that passed through Cardenales de Lara is staggering. Over two decades, no fewer than 23 key Blue Jays players honed their craft in Barquisimeto:

- Franchise Pioneers: Doug Ault, Garth Iorg, Willie Upshaw, Dave McKay, and Ernie Whitt.
- 1980s Stars & All-Stars: Lloyd Moseby, Jesse Barfield, Geno Petralli, Kelly Gruber, Cecil Fielder, and Glenallen Hill.
- 1992–1993 World Series Champions: Pat Borders (the 1992 World Series MVP), Todd Stottlemyre, Ed Sprague, Mark Whiten, Derek Bell, Mike Timlin, Randy Knorr, and Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame inductee Rob Ducey.
- 1990s & 2000s: 1996 Cy Young winner Pat Hentgen, Shawn Green, Shannon Stewart, and Hall of Famer Roy Halladay.

AN EXTRAORDINARY ROSTER

Blue Jays Stars Developed in Cardenales Red



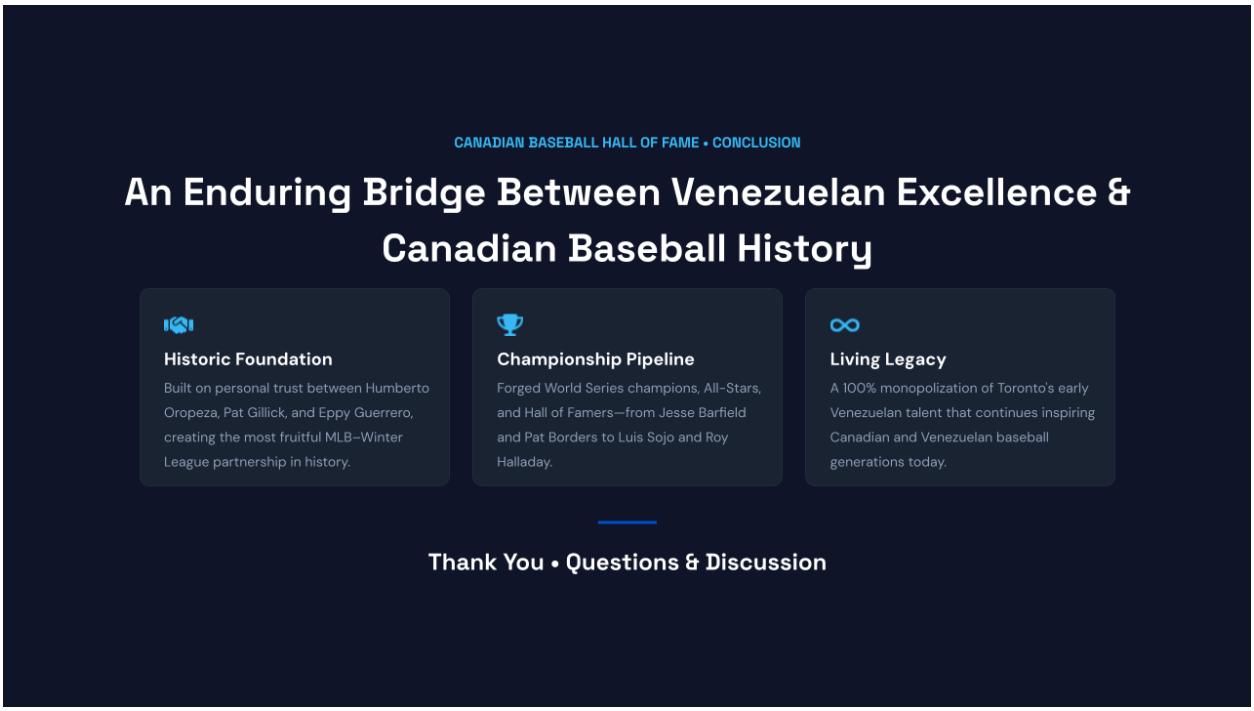
While North American players went south to develop, Venezuelan talent came north to lead Toronto. There is one statistic that defines this relationship better than any other: **From 1976 all the way through 1997, every single Venezuelan player who played for the Toronto Blue Jays belonged to Cardenales de Lara.**

It began with pitching anchor Luis Leal, who won 51 games for Toronto. It continued with Fred Manrique, Tobías Hernández, and Alexis Infante. In the championship 1990s, it included bullpen arm Antonio Castillo, 1993 World Series champion William Cañate, Venezuelan legend Robert 'La Pared Negra' Pérez, Giovanni Carrara, Edwin Hurtado, Tomás Pérez, Miguel Cairo, and Kelvin Escobar.

And of course, Luis Sojo—a 4-time World Series champion who remains the ultimate bridge figure between Lara and Toronto. Today, that legacy continues with modern MLB stars like Andrés Giménez and top prospect Yohendrick Piñango.



In conclusion, the relationship between Cardenales de Lara and the Toronto Blue Jays was far more than an operational contract. It was an enduring institutional alliance built on personal trust between visionaries like Humberto Oropeza, Pat



Gillick, and Epy Guerrero. It provided North American prospects with a competitive winter proving ground while opening a direct pathway for Venezuelan talent to reach Major League stardom and deliver back-to-back World Series titles to Canada. Barquisimeto holds an indelible place in Canadian baseball history.

Arturo Marcano
November 2026