

features

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Practice! Practice! Practice!

The History of the King Ranch Cowboys Baseball Team

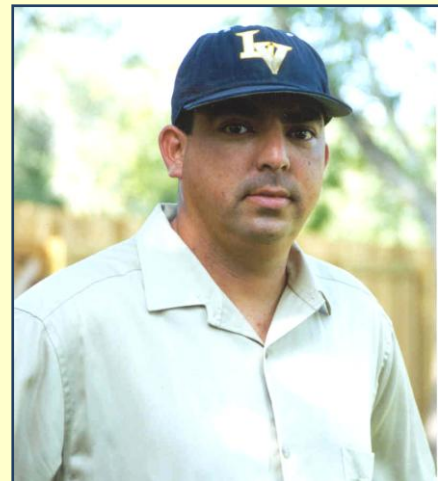
Donavan Lopez was featured in this space in October 2009 when **Features** included a piece on the history of Los Paisanos Athletic Club at Texas A&I University, prior to that university joining the Texas A&M University System. If you missed that issue, you can still read it by going to <http://www.robertleos.com/CaptainD.pdf>.

This issue features another work by Mr. Lopez, **Practice! Practice! Practice!, The History of the King Ranch Cowboys Baseball Team**. This book, published by Mr. Lopez, presents a fascinating look at baseball in Texas over fifty years ago. While reading this book, I tried to imagine the team playing at Assault Field*, on the King Ranch, on a hot, humid, summer afternoon. Mr. Lopez gave me a good idea of what that would be like.

Among the noteworthy aspects of this book is the fact that Mr. Lopez used oral history to bring this story to life. Certainly, he researched newspaper articles in archives to verify facts, but it was the experiences of those who were there that form the basis of this history. It reminded me of just how important it is to ask for the story if you want it. Too often I have heard from friends that they wished they had asked a parent or other relative about some aspect of their lives. They didn't, and that piece of history was gone forever.

Another feature of the book is a wonderful collection of photographs of baseball teams from Kingsville in the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's. The author even managed to slip in photographs of teams on which he played—the 1997 Kingsville Wildcats and the 1998 Texas Mustangs. The book includes team rosters from King Ranch baseball teams that date back to 1948. Last, but not least, please read the poignant "Afterword," written by Professor Harry Huebel of Texas A&M University-Kingsville. You can find it on page 4 of this feature.

I hope you enjoy my chat with Donavan "Captain D" Lopez about the writing of **Practice! Practice! Practice!** Robert Leos. 🐾



Donavan "Captain D" Lopez
Kingsville, Texas

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Features: What was the inspiration for the book, *Practice! Practice! Practice!?*

Captain D: *When I was a little kid, I would see Cipriano García umpiring and always heard wonderful stories of his playing days. Then I would see the Entex Guy, Mon Aguilar, and people would say he was a hell of a player. Because my dad was an umpire, I grew up around the local baseball fields, where I met these local heroes. The story always revolved around "Los Cowboys," or the "King Ranch Cowboys." By the time I was in college only the older generations in town knew the stories. When I was asked to write a thesis for my master's degree, I had to do it on the King Ranch Cowboys baseball team. What I always wanted to do was keep the wonderful stories and legends alive forever. The thesis allowed me to do it. It also helped that at the time, I was playing semi-pro baseball myself.*

Features: You wrote the book a number of years ago. Are you still in contact with some of the individuals who played on the King Ranch team?

Captain D: *Of course, I am still in contact with these guys all the time. We have lost a few since the reunion in 2000, but I love and respect these guys just as much as the community did during their hey days.*

Features: How long did it take you to write this book—from the idea stage until publication?

Captain D: *From the first history class that had us make a proposal for a thesis statement to the actual final printing took about five years. I had to fight, claw and scrape the concept across my thesis committee to do it, but it was worth it in the end. My good friend and mentor, Dr. Harry Huebel, pushed it through. Huebel, an accomplished scholar and author, not to*

mention avid Texas A&I Javelina baseball fan, was my pillar of hope. He sat me in his office one day and said, "Look, if you're so fixed on doing this, then we will do it together." I always loved going back and telling him the new stories and bits of information I uncovered. The best part was that he was just as enthusiastic to hear them. He had his own stories about the guys that played on the Cowboys. He remembered many of the Cowboys from his softball playing days in Kingsville. His recollections included the late, great Lencho Mendieta, Piano, Balde Delgado and many others.

Features: What was the most challenging aspect of gathering the oral history? Tracking down specific individuals or getting their stories when you found them?

Captain D: *I made a list of people I wanted to interview. The list grew as the interviews continued and I tracked them down. It also helped that the first person I interviewed was the world famous folk speaker, "tall-taler" and the most famous Kineño, Alberto "LoLo" Treviño. I remember that after about two and a half hours into the interview, he reminded me that I had said that the interview would only take about thirty minutes. I could not help myself. I was so mesmerized by the interview. One of the most respected captains on the team was Lencho Mendieta. Unfortunately, he passed away roughly two years before I initiated my research. That broke my heart. Many times, the opponents' interviews were just as exciting as the King Ranch players' interviews.*

Features: Did you record all of the experiences that former players told you and if so, where are they archived?

Captain D: *Dr. Leslie Hunter and his wonderful wife, Cecilia Aros-Hunter, were very instrumental in the oral histories. It was their devotion to preserving history that made me want to preserve the history of the King Ranch baseball team. Mrs. Hunter was the Director of the Archives on*

campus and she sent me out with a cassette player and a microphone. I was experimenting with video recording at the time, so many of the interviews were also recorded on VHS tapes. I am undecided about where my research will be housed. I am considering the King Ranch Museum and the South Texas Archives, located on the Texas A&M University-Kingsville campus. What I really want is to create a South Texas Baseball Museum.

Features: Do you have other projects in the works? Are there other interesting things going on in Kingsville or in the surrounding areas?

I am still working on a history of my church, St. Martin's Catholic Church, in Kingsville. I want to finish it to coincide with the centennial celebration planned in 2014.



All photos are courtesy of Donovan Lopez and used with his permission. Above right, Captain D in Kingsville, Texas (on the Harley Davidson). Above, a reunion of former players at the King Ranch, Kingville, Texas. 2000. Right, a group of King Ranch Cowboys before a game.

**The King Ranch Cowboys played on Assault Field, on the King Ranch. Assault Field was named after the King Ranch's Hall of Fame thoroughbred racehorse who won the U.S. Triple Crown in 1946.*

Practice! Practice! Practice! The History of the King Ranch Cowboys Baseball Team and The Compromise: The History of the Texas A&I University Los Paisanos Athletic Club are available at the Texas A&M University-Kingsville bookstore and the King Ranch Museum. Call 361-592-1012 for information or contact by Donovan Lopez by e-mail at lopezdonavan@sbcglobal.net.



**Afterword by Dr. Harry R. Huebel
Professor of History
Texas A&M University-Kingsville**

When I first examined the research on the King Ranch Cowboys that Donovan Lopez was gathering for his master's thesis, I did not approach his work as a professional historian, but as a baseball fanatic. I must confess that my first response was to envy the memories of the individuals he interviewed. I wanted to steal those memories. I wanted to see the batting stance of Gilberto Rodríguez. I wanted to see a young Balde Delgado scoop up a ground ball and throw to first. How good was his arm? I wanted to watch Don Newcombe interact with the people of Kingsville. I wanted to try to hit Alberto Treviño's curve. I wanted to walk on Assault Park, check out that unique fence, and hear the dugout chatter and the banter of the fans. Of course, you cannot steal memories except in science fiction, but a skilled historian can collect, verify, and transmit the memories of others through print and photographs. For members of the Cowboys, their friends and relatives, rival players, fans, and people who resided in South Texas, Donovan's study has helped us experience a memorable baseball team and its impact on the Coastal Bend. As I mentioned, my first response was as a fan. Of course, with Les Hunter, I eventually began to think about the historical significance of the Cowboys. Clearly, this is a work with profound implications beyond the history of baseball. Donovan's work is a reminder of how much of South Texas history remains untold and unwritten, and the necessity for the coming generation of scholars to "work for the night is coming." Oral history is essential for the study of the unique and complex nature of the region, and we must harvest memories quickly. Above all, Donovan's study of the Cowboys illustrates the sophisticated, dignified, tolerant, and progressive nature of working-class Mexican-American life after World War II. The work ethic of the Cowboys signified the drive that has produced successful and independent people throughout all walks of life in South Texas. Donovan Lopez reveals a people, however, "ordinary" or forgotten, nurtured by a vital culture that prepared them to face and to shape the second half of the twentieth century.

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