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NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture, Volume 21, Number 2,
Spring 2013, pp. 135-139 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nin.2013.0026>

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Bill Kulik

The Gringo Malo Speaks the Language of the Game

FRANKLIN OTTO

His introduction to the game of baseball came at the age of seven, on a summer vacation while visiting his cousins in Rhode Island. William Kulik was born in New Jersey but moved with his parents at a very young age to South America. He spent nine years living in Argentina, Bolivia, and Colombia, none of which are bastions of baseball. When Bill played Wiffle ball with his cousins, his teammates stood behind the backstop because after he swung at the ball, he threw the bat. Attending his first major-league game at Shea Stadium, Bill thought Wayne Garrett was “God’s gift to baseball” because he hit a home run and Bill caught the ball. He thought every time you went to a game, you caught a ball.

Being behind the other kids in learning the subtleties of the game almost worked out to his advantage later on. Playing soccer at high elevations in both Bolivia and Colombia, he was becoming a fine-tuned athlete. Returning to New Jersey for four years of high school, his inexperience with the game was welcomed by the baseball coaches who proceeded to mold him. He played varsity ball in high school and at Bryant College in Rhode Island, mostly as an outfielder and pitcher.

Currently, Bill anchors the three-person Spanish-language broadcast team for the Philadelphia Phillies. They rotate their responsibilities doing three innings each of play-by-play and color analysis. I interviewed him at Citizen’s Bank Park in August 2011.

How did you become interested in broadcasting?

After graduating from college, I went to work in the fledgling telecommunications field in Boston, building the New England Sports Network tower and installing pay-per-view systems in hotels. Later on working for Comcast, I headed up an innovative distance-learning program between the Museum of Science and the Cambridge public schools. Deciding that if I was going to

stay in the cable television business I wanted to do something I really loved, I started a weekly show called *Forever Baseball* that got carried on many Comcast local-access stations. Before I knew it, I was in five million homes.

One afternoon, my crew and I went to Fenway Park to do a feature. The Yankees are in town and Dan Duquette has just acquired Pedro Martinez, who is going up against Roger Clemens. I happen to be standing within earshot of Dan and some folks, and Dan sounds like he's annoyed because there is no Hispanic coverage of any sorts. So I took a deep breath, walked over to the group and told Mr. Duquette that I might be able to help. The next thing I know it's, "Sit down, son." Watching the game from Mr. Duquette's box, a deal is cut. I quit my job and started a company called Spanish Baseball Productions (SBN) which began carrying Spanish-language broadcasts in Boston.

How did you wind up in Philadelphia?

We were in Philadelphia during an interleague series. After watching us, the Philly brass wanted to know if I could do the same thing here that I was doing in Boston, which had a much smaller Hispanic community. I thought, if I could be close to my high school home and double the sales efforts, why not? So we expanded.

How did you get nicknamed Gringo Malo?

We were doing our pre-game show, which includes a call-in portion. This is back in 2003 around the time of the Sammy Sosa illegal-bat incident. I was only producing then in Boston and was rarely on the air. My announcer was Dominican and said very emphatically that Sammy didn't use the bat intentionally and he didn't know the bat had been doctored. There's a lull in the calls, so on the air I say to my colleague, "Hey, an illegal bat is an illegal bat. Sammy has to be suspended for it." My colleague says, "*Ay, ese Gringo Malo.*" (Oh, that Terrible Gringo.) And don't you know the phone lines light up and everyone now is on my case. So, if you ask the Hispanic ballplayers in Boston or Philadelphia whether they know who Bill Kulik is, they'll say, "No." But ask them if they know *Gringo Malo*, and they'll immediately say, "Sure."

What kinds of feedback do you get from the listening audience?

At first, people were only interested in calling to talk about particular Hispanic players or stars, like Sammy Sosa and Manny Ramirez. Not even interested in whether the Phillies were winning or not. I notice that now on our call-in show the hard-core audience has definitely converted to pure Phillies fans. They absolutely get it. They want to talk about why the Phillies lost last night, or moan about a Charlie Manuel decision with a particular pitcher. They are caring about how the team is going to win and what the rotation should be. They now know just as much about Ryan Howard and Jimmie Rollins as they do of the

Fig. 1. Bill Kulik. Photo by the author.

Latino players. Five years ago, I guarantee, they would not have known who any of these guys were.

How do you address the cultural and linguistic nuances of the Latino communities?

I don't really think a lot of markets understand the cultural nuances between a Puerto Rican Latino, a Dominican Latino, a Cuban Latino, or a Mexican Latino. We play our Spanish kind of down-the-middle, not favoring one group over another. We absolutely allow *Spanglish* in our broadcasts because we are talking to two, three, or four generations of Latinos, and some are more dominant in English than Spanish.¹ I don't want to lose these folks to the English-speaking broadcasters. I want them to listen and enjoy the game with their parents and to unite the Hispanic community. That's our main goal.

Has fluency in Spanish and exposure to the Hispanic culture influenced the manner in which you approach your job and look at life in general?

Absolutely. I can give you a recent example. I was on vacation with my fiancé in the Dominican Republic at an all-inclusive resort, which really limits your expo-

sure to the local culture. I happened to strike-up a conversation in Spanish with our maid and told her that I'd love some local fish. Here was a humble woman who saw my ability to communicate in her language and sensed my interest in her as a person. A short while later, we visited her relatives, who treated us to a horseback ride and a wonderful meal of fresh fried fish on the beach.

My fiancé has a shoe store which caters to mostly Hispanic and African American clientele. I am able to help her out from time-to-time. When the Hispanic women come up to the cash register to pay, I sometimes say, "*Diez pesos y se acaba esta vaina.*" (Ten dollars and this nuisance is finished.) They get a real charge hearing this *gringo* unexpectedly speaking their language. There is an element of racism and apprehension that I don't feel, which I attribute to my being able to communicate in Spanish and my assimilation of the Latino culture.

Some players say that 80 percent of the game is mental and 20 percent is ability. Is there something comparable for you?

Absolutely. I think that one of my advantages is that I played as a starter at a pretty high level through high school and college. That was my preparation, and I lean on that all the time. Many broadcasters who have played at the professional level may not realize that they are leaning on all of their experiences. It's a special gift we've been given—both the chance to play on the field and then to take it to the broadcast booth. I don't go to work, I go to the park, so I cherish every day I have here. Taking those fun days from the neighborhood or the playing field and bringing them into the broadcast booth is my favorite thing to do.

How do you keep all of your anecdotes and statistics organized so that you can plug them in at the right time?

I probably have a very silly memory for a lot of the anecdotes, and in particular, some of the history of the sport. During the color analysis portion of the broadcast, some of the anecdotes will be from my own playing career even though it's not a major-league career. It's an opportunity to teach the fans about baseball, especially those who know very little about the game. With play-by-play, you don't have much time for anecdotes because you're painting a picture of the game as it's unfolding and you have to keep everyone informed about what's happening on the field. I do plenty of statistics, but too many are a crutch to kill time. I rather do more banter or describing the scene, the weather, the fans or something going on around the ballpark.

When you talk with other broadcasters or writers, what do they seem most interested in?

They get to know eighteen of the twenty-five players fairly well, including the Latino players who are conversant in English. On occasion, they will ask me

about a particular Latino player, especially if there is a cultural or language barrier. They might have seen a story of a player who is doing well and ask, “What’s he like? Is he from a poor neighborhood or rich neighborhood, because he seems different from the others? What are differences between a Caribbean player and a South American player?” We’ll get all kinds of pronunciation questions, whether it is the player’s name or his hometown.

Do you have any signature calls?

There is one I use to open the game. “*Abrochen los cinturones que el Gringo Malo tiene el micrófono. Cuidense.*” (“Fasten your seat belts because *Gringo Malo* has the mike. Beware.”) My strike-out calls are, “*Siéntate y gracias por tu participación*” (“Take a seat and thanks for participating”), and “*Puro vientos*” or “*Congelado*” (“All air” or “Frozen”), depending on whether he was swinging or watching. My home-run call is, “*Vete de aquí. Hasta la vista pelotita.*” (“Get out of here. See you later little ball.”) I also like to use programmed recordings for some dry, light-hearted humor. After an error, I play Bart Simpson’s “*Ahí caramba!*” (“Aw, shucks!”) I tend to find rare statistics which make my colleagues wonder where the heck I got that from? “*Desde la mente del Gringo Malo.*” (“From the mind of the *Gringo Malo*.”) And I’ll play the theme from *The Twilight Zone*.

NOTES

1. *Spanglish*, as a linguistic phenomenon incorporating code-switching and word-borrowing, elicits strong opinions on its viability as a form of communication. It is evident in certain areas of the United States and has also been identified within the British population of Argentina and in the Panama Canal Zone. Having worked in the field of language policy in education for twenty seven years, I am aware of how practitioners value the correctness of language representation and usage and disdain the use of *Spanglish* as a viable form of communication.

I have listened to Bill Kulik’s radio broadcasts on several occasions and consider his Spanish to be grammatical albeit infused with an Americanized accent. The play-by-play and color analyst roles of his broadcast team are shared each game on a rotating basis with a native-born Cuban and Dominican. Bill’s passion for the game is beyond question. He is informative and provides an accurate portrayal of the action on the field in a uniquely entertaining manner. I hear other Spanish broadcasters seamlessly incorporate baseball terminology in English into their narrations. Being “America’s game,” it’s unavoidable. It’s probably a matter of degree as to what their listening audience finds acceptable.