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## Mexico could be a team to beat in the Junior League World Series

It's been 20 years since a team from Mexicali, Mexico, became the first and only team from that country to win the Junior League World Series in Taylor.

This year could spell a return to greatness.

Tony Garcia, a Southgate resident who serves as the World Series' honorary "ambassador to Mexico," watched as the all-stars from the Beto Avila Little League in Boca Del Rio, Veracruz, became the national champions of Mexico.

In the process, the team of 13- and 14-year-olds received a berth in JLWS, scheduled for August 10-16 at Heritage Park.

Garcia said he was impressed by the team, which went undefeated in the highly competitive and balanced national tournament. In the championship game, Boca Del Rio defeated the all-stars from Garcia's hometown, Nuevo Laredo, Coahila, 5-0.

Also consider that in 2007, as 12-year-olds, the team from Veracruz was one win shy of qualifying for the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

Garcia said this could be Team Mexico's year. He added that the Veracruz boys are nearly as strong as the Mexicali world championship team from 1988.

"I think they'll do very well," said Garcia, who will serve as one of the team's interpreters. "I think they're as good as Hawaii and the Far East teams were last year."

That's high praise. Pearl City, Hawaii, won the world championship in Taylor in 2008. Manila, Philippines – the Asia-Pacific champions – finished runner-up.

Mexico's history in the Junior League World Series dates back to 1986, when a team from Hermosillo, Sonora, went 2-2 in the international tournament's sixth year.

From 1986 through 1999, the national champion of Mexico received an automatic berth in the series, much like the national champions of Puerto Rico and Canada.

During that time, there was no Latin America Regional Tournament. That tourney was instituted in 2000, meaning Mexico and Puerto Rico had to win the region to gain entry to the World Series. A team from Monterrey was the first Latin America Regional champion.

In 2004, World Series organizers decided to create two five-team pools: a USA Pool and an International Pool. As a result, two Latin America teams now play in the series – the Latin America Regional champ, plus a team from either Mexico or Puerto Rico.

The Mexican national champion gains an automatic berth in even-numbered years; the Puerto Rican national champion is part of the series in odd-numbered years.

The odd team out can still qualify for the series, but must win the Latin America Region.

In 2004 and 2006, the last two times Mexico played in the series, teams from Guaymas, Sonora, were national champions.

This year's team from Boca Del Rio is the first from the state of Veracruz to qualify for the JLWS.

The team from Mexico is the fourth to qualify for the World Series. Coming to Taylor for the first time will be teams from Willemstad, Curacao, in the Northern Antilles (Latin America champion) and an American team based in London, England (Europe/Middle East/Africa champ). Back for the second year in a row will be the team from the Philippines.

Rounding out the International Pool will be the national champions of Canada. That tournament is set for August 1-8 in Coquitlam, British Columbia.

The USA Pool will be made up of champions from five regions. The Michigan state champion will play in the Central Regional Tournament, set for August 4-9 in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Other tournaments are scheduled for Aliso Viejo, California; Midland, Texas; Cartersville, Georgia; and Freehold Township, New Jersey.

**ABOUT BETO AVILA:** The league of the national champions of Mexico is named for Roberto Francisco "Beto" Avila Gonzalez, a former Major League standout who became the first Hispanic player to win a batting championship when he hit .341 for Cleveland in 1954.

Avila, known better as Bobby in the United States, was born in Veracruz, Veracruz. He played second base and batted right for Cleveland (1949-1958), Baltimore (1959), Boston (1959) and Milwaukee (1959).

Named to the A.L. all-star team three times, Avila played in the 1954 Major League World Series with Cleveland vs. the New York Giants. Later, he served as mayor in Veracruz and then became president of the Mexican League.

He passed away in 2004 at the age of 80, but he is still widely recognized as the player who helped make baseball the popular sport it is today in Mexico.

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