

This is one installment in a team effort by The Cleveland Fan, highlighting the top local sports figures by jersey number. Please weigh in with your thoughts on the "Boards". As David Letterman would say, "For entertainment purposes only; please, no wagering"



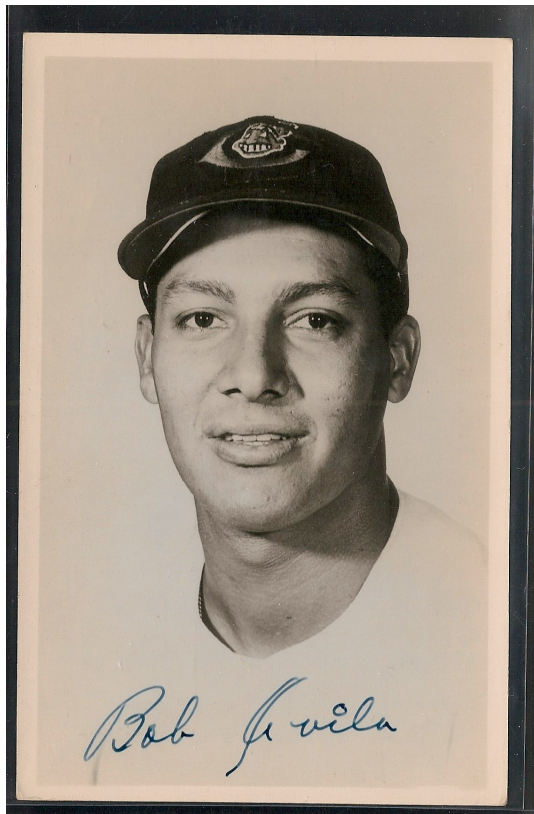
For some reason, our city has not been blessed with a great number of notable players wearing the #1. A handful of Indians infielders of varying importance surfaced in our search....along with a Browns wide receiver with a pop star namesake, and a couple of solid but mostly unspectacular point guards for the Cavs. To find the best of the lot, we had to go back to a time and a team too distant for even this old-timer of a writer to remember first hand.

The 1954 Cleveland Indians won 111 games, and their .721 winning percentage still stands as the best in major league baseball in the last 100 years. Playing a 154-game schedule, their percentage tops even the 1998 Yankees (114 wins, .704) and the 2001 Seattle Mariners (116 wins, .716). You might say the fact that baseball's best team of the modern era was then swept in the World Series by Willie Mays and the Giants is what makes them an authentic Cleveland sports story, albeit one for another day.

That Indians team is remembered mostly for it's starting pitching staff of Feller, Lemon, Wynn, Houtteman and Garcia, which is [considered one](#) of the [best](#) , if not the best, in baseball history.

And they had sticks...notably third baseman Al Rosen, who was coming off a 1953 season in which he won the AL MVP Award after leading the American League in homers, RBI, slugging percentage, total bases, OPS and WaR...and he didn't even know what those last two stats were. When Rosen slipped to a mere 24 HR and 102 RBI in '54, All-Star centerfielder Larry Doby took over, winning the AL crown in home runs and RBI, and coming in 2nd for MVP.

If you asked today's Tribe fans what member of that Indians team won the AL batting title though, few of them could come up with the name of the Mexican-born second baseman who had a career year in '54, hitting .341 and finishing 3rd in the AL MVP balloting. But once we looked around at the (admittedly rather weak) competition, it wasn't difficult for us to select [Bob by Avila](#) as the best Cleveland player to ever wear the #1.



Roberto Francisco Ávila Gonzales was known as 'Beto' in his native Veracruz, Mexico, where his athletic skills blossomed early, landing him a professional soccer contract at the tender age of 14. Avila's father was a successful attorney, and pushed young Beto to pursue a legal career. But the teenager Avila read a book about baseball and taught himself the game. By the age of

19 (1943) he was playing professionally in the rapidly growing Mexican League, where he made his mark as a slick fielder, an excellent bunter and baserunner, and a natural hitter.

His background in soccer, and his natural dexterity with his feet, led Avila to perfect the practice of kicking the ball from an infielder's glove when he slid into a base. This technique was not always appreciated by the opponent, but the aggressive and daring Avila was never deterred.

By the mid-40's, Beto Avila was a star in Mexico. From 1945-48, he was among the league leaders in batting average, and his speed always had him near the lead in stolen bases and triples as well. After he hit .359 in 1947, Leo Durocher and Branch Rickey offered Avila a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, but before he could sign, Durocher was suspended from baseball, and Rickey signed another second baseman...a guy named Jackie Robinson.

Some reports say Avila turned down Rickey's offer of \$10,000, but Avila told the *L.A. Times* in 1962, "Mr. Rickey offered me \$9,000, but I wanted \$10,000, I think he would have given me what I wanted if he hadn't had Jackie Robinson.

Rickey made history with Robinson, but the decision worked to the Indians' benefit. A year later, after winning the Mexican League batting title in 1948 with a .346 average, Avila signed with Cleveland for \$17,500, and made his debut with the major league club in 1949 as the backup to the Tribe's regular second baseman, Joe Gordon.

"Everybody knows who Avila was in Mexico. He was an inspiration, of course, for Mexican ballplayers to follow to the States and play in the major leagues. He did a good job. Everybody knows and recognizes what he did." - □ Fernando Valenzuela, former Dodger pitcher, and a native of Navojoa, Mexico.



Now known as "Bobby" as a professional player in Cleveland, Avila didn't play regularly until the 1950 season, but from '50-'52, he hit .299, .304, and .300, making the All-Star team in '51 and finishing 10th in the AL MVP voting. On June 20, 1951, Avila hit three home runs, a double and a single in a 14-8 Indians' victory over Boston at Fenway Park. He led the AL in triples in 1952

with 11.

The average slipped a bit to .286 in 1953 before he exploded to win the AL batting crown at .341 in the magical season of 1954, becoming the first Latino to win a batting title in major league baseball. He beat out another Latin player, Cuba's Minnie Minoso (.320) for the title, although Ted Williams hit .345, but due to injuries, failed to qualify for the title with enough at-bats. Avila started out in Cleveland as the leadoff man in the order, but was soon moved to the second spot to take advantage of his bunting and contact hitting abilities.

Avila led the AL in sacrifice hits in both '54 and '55, but the smallish second baseman had some punch as well. In his career year of '54, Avila (*pictured at right with Willie Mays during the '54 World Series*) had 27 doubles, 15 home runs and 67 RBI. He had 10 or more homers three other times in his career, and finished with 80 career dingers.

Avila's batting crown in '54 was remarkable in that he broke his thumb in early June, when the Yankee's Hank Bauer slid into him at second base. He was hitting close to .400 at the time, but he played through the injury (143 games) and surged late in the season to take the title. Avila played four more full seasons as the regular Indians second baseman, but he never hit for an average over .272 after that stellar year.

"He has that extra something that makes a great hitter. Call it the competitive instinct.... He's always fighting the pitcher, never choking up, and never giving an inch.... In a tough spot, I'm always glad to see Bobby coming to the plate." — Cleveland general manager Hank Greenberg

