

The Mayan Magician

Isabel was born in Oxtapakab, a very small Mayan pueblo almost an hour south of Merida, but her family worked in a tourist hotel on the beach in Merida. As a child and tomboy, she played baseball with her four brothers, who grew-up to play minor league baseball for the *Yucatán Leones*. Isabel said she always expected she would one day go along with them when they left to play ball at the *Parque Kukulcán* in Merida. And that is exactly what she did.

But first, Izzie learned how to throw the knuckleball from an American, Joe Meister, who had dropped out of the San Diego Padres organization because of his drinking habits and moved down south where the rules weren't so strict toward pitchers who liked to enjoy a beer every hour or so.

Joe taught Izzie how to throw the pitch while he was vacationing at the hotel where she worked in Merida. The *Hacienda Xcanatun* is a picturesque 18th Century Mayan coastal resort with 18 rooms. Joe found out Izzie was a pitcher when she was tossing large bars of soap down the hallway outside his suite to the other maids who would catch them on the fly and put them inside the bathrooms.

"Hey, ése es un poco de brazo que usted tien," he told her, sticking his head out the door.

"I know. I pitch to my brothers who play for the Yucatan Lions," she said, and that's how Joe found out Isabel spoke fluent English, which she had learned from the British Catholic Priest in her village, Father Cook.

"That's a coincidence!" said Joe. "I pitch for them."

That's when Isabel said she wanted to learn to pitch for them also, and she wanted him to teach her. The look on her pretty face was deadly serious, and Joe knew right away that this five-foot-four dynamo had the courage to learn. "You do understand that the Mexican leagues don't permit women to play?" he pointed out.

"I know that the Lions are in last place. I also know from my brothers that baseball is a business and that if they believe they can win with me on the mound, then they will make an exception," she said. "However, I would like to learn a pitch that will make me an equal with the men. Do you know of such a pitch, *señor*?"

Yes, Joe knew of such a pitch, and it actually surprised him to think there had been no American woman who had thought of this before. It made sense. Throwing the knuckleball did not require a man's strength or stamina. In fact, power was a liability. Also, a woman's smaller hand would make it easier to grip the ball the way the knuckler required.

"Tell you what. I've got some gloves and a ball in my room. You've got a pretty mean margarita that you serve in your *cantina*. I'll meet you in the tropical garden in fifteen minutes. It has a long stretch of grass where

we can practice throwing. You meet me there with about a dozen of those margaritas, and I'll show you how to pitch the equalizer, the knuckleball."

Joe Meister didn't know it that day but what he was about to teach Isabel was to be officially inscribed on a piece of laminated parchment on a plaque with her picture, inside a glass case, in the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame. His instructions to her will also forever be emblazoned in the memories of the 187 major league baseball men who went down swinging that year, swatting vainly at Izzie's floating dipster. How quickly she adapted to these instructions to create her unique brand of knuckleball was what made Izzie the magician:

"To get a perfect knuckleball grip, hold out your thumb, and the first two fingers. Then place your thumb tip and first two fingertips on the ball all at the same time, and not on any seams. Then push the ball with your left hand into the palm of your right hand, leaving your fingertips in place. Your fingers will curl. Then use your ring finger and/or pinky to gently hold the ball so it won't slide out the side of your hand. Some people use only the ring finger; others use just the pinky and place the knuckle of the ring finger against the ball. It's really whatever you're comfortable with and whatever works. Most people try different grips until they get one to work consistently. Then rev back and throw it. Remember, don't snap your wrist down (like a fastball) and don't push the ball (like a shotput). It's a relatively normal throwing motion. Let the forward momentum of your arm create speed on

the ball (as it rests against the palm), and then let your fingers push the ball out when the momentum shifts to the release point. You'll find that you release the ball a little earlier than if you were throwing a fastball, mainly because of the grip. You'll take your ring and/or pinky finger off of the ball just before you release and just as you start to push the ball out with your fingertips."

By the time the sun was setting over the garden, there were fifteen tourists standing and marveling at the dark-skinned beauty in the maid's uniform who was tossing flutterballs with accuracy to her American coach. In a few hours, Isabel had mastered the grip and had developed a wind-up that she would gradually perfect, in the months to come, until Joe believed she was indeed ready for her audition with the Lions. I was one of those tourists, and I introduced myself to Isabel after Joe had exhausted himself and needed to reinforce his alcoholic constitution inside the hotel *cantina*.

"Good evening, Miss Velasquez. My name is Andrew Wilmington. I am an agent for professional athletes in San Diego, California. I was watching your progress with quite some interest. Have you ever thought of contracting yourself with a professional women's' softball team? In fact, I am in touch with some very . . ."

"Excuse me, but I am contracting with the Yucatan Lions. I want to play professional baseball," she said. "My brothers play for them, and I want to join them."

She turned around, thinking that I was discouraged, but I caught her by the arm before she could leave. I could see the sun going down behind her above the trees, and the Mayan ruins that were all around this hotel gave me a sudden vision of a scene from the recent Mel Gibson movie, *Apocalypto*, and it made me wince. I saw Isabel at the top of Teotihuacan's giant Pyramid of the Moon. In slow motion, the priest's sword lopped off the head of the sacrificial victim, and this head was promptly handed to Isabel, who was wearing the colorful robes and feathers of a priestess. She smiled, went into her windup, and threw the head. Instead of rolling down the steps of the pyramid, however, the head flew into the air like a knuckleball, dipping and floating crazily down to the bottom.

"Come with me to my village, señor. I will show you why I want to pitch," said Isabel, taking my hand as the sun finally sank behind us into the ocean's waves.

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We drove out to her village in the twilight, and I couldn't see anything outside, except the grass and the twin dirt paths made from the many used cars and trucks that had gone before us, which I watched in the headlights' beam. Isabel told me a story about a governor of Merida, one Felipe Carillo, who fell in love with an American, Alma Reed, a writer for the *New York Times*, during the early 1920s.

"We still sing a song about them, and they are my personal patron saints. Carrillo formed *ejidos*, or communal farms, legalized birth control, gave women the right to vote and had the constitution translated into Mayan. Our people thought we might be saved from abject poverty."

I was curious. "What happened?"

Izzie flashed me a dark look, as the engine in her old Ford Explorer popped angrily. "Reed and Carrillo promptly fell in love, and he nicknamed her *Peregrino*, or pilgrim. Her articles helped Mexico to recover artifacts Americans had pillaged from the ruins. The lovers planned to marry in January 1924, and Reed returned home to San Francisco to prepare. Days before the wedding, hacienda owners angered by Carrillo's reforms marched him, with Reed's intended wedding band in his hand, to Merida's cemetery and executed him by firing squad. The bullet holes are still visible in the wall near his grave."

"How tragic! I can see why you admire them."

"Yes, the Maya was once a powerful civilization, but the Spanish and now the gringos have taken it over. We work as laborers for their tourist investments. Many people believe we want to bring back our past, but they are wrong. We want modern advancements, just like you have. iPods, cell phones, health care, air conditioning, you name it. But we cannot advance as long as we are conquered to be peasants, just because we are Maya."

We pulled into the *hacienda*, and it consisted of one main building, where an elderly Mexican family still lived, but the main Mayan population, about two-hundred families, lived in small, thatch-roofed huts and concrete blocked houses that faced the concrete strip running down the middle of the road. There were only two street lamps powered by an old gas engine generator that could be heard chugging into the night, and as we pulled in front of the three concrete blocks that Isabel said were her family's home, I couldn't help but feel sadness for these once-noble natives. Conquered by the Spanish, subjugated by the Mexican Government in cooperation with the North American investment community, they were now banished to the pueblos next to the old *haciendas* of their colonial overlords.

Inside the largest building, which served as the family's living room, the four brothers, Juan, Pedro, Alfonzo and Ricardo, were watching the Mexican National Soccer Team on the tiny color television set, up above in the corner. There was also a long display of holy articles and flowers on a wooden shrine next to the wall. The rest of the room was furnished with inexpensive chairs and a small couch from Merida's new Wal-Mart, covered with a multicolored, homemade Indian blanket. The mother of the family, Dolores, was sitting on the couch with a bowl of fruit, which she was carefully slicing up for dinner. Their father, Alonzo, had died three years before from a heart attack. His picture was up on the same religious shrine in the center of the room.

"You must excuse my family," said Isabel. "They can merely speak Spanish. I am the only one who finished school with Father Cook. I try to teach my brothers some English, in case they get drafted by the Padres, up north, but they haven't learned much. *Es correcto, mi hermanos? Usted es un manojo de burros, no?*"

Each man stood up and shook my hand. I could feel the power in their grips, and I knew they were athletes.

"Es un agente para los jugadores del béisbol en América," Isabel told them, and their eyes brightened.

After she explained to her family that she had today learned a new pitch that was going to get her into professional baseball, not one of them seemed to scoff. Isabel had a strange power over her family, as if they believed she was, indeed, a magical creature.

As I ate dinner with them that night, I also became convinced that Isabel Velasquez would succeed in her baseball quest. She seemed to exude that spark of desire I have seen in other athletes—mostly males—but it was the same flash which told me she would do anything and pay any price to achieve personal greatness. It was the same spirit that harkened back to those boys who pitched against barns in rural America, and the present crop of Caribbean and Mexican players who sacrificed time and energy on the rock-pitted playing fields, playing until dark, playing until their hands were blistered, their knees and elbows were bloodied, and their muscles were

sore, playing until they got that call from the men in those offices far above them, who also knew the spark that I knew so well, who also knew the glow that separated these athletes from the masses of others who had neither the talent nor the urgent dream to get them to the top of the heap. Isabel smiled at me, and I negotiated her contract with the Yucatan Lions one month later.

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I suppose it was easier for me to sign Isabel with the Padres because they already had broken the "female barrier," so to speak, when they hired a woman to be their traveling massage therapist. They got a lot of flak from players and coaches around the league, but when Keith Hernandez, the announcer for the New York Mets, remarked on the air that "Women don't belong in the dugout," the owner of the Padres, Larry Masters, dug in his heels about the whole issue. "We believe women belong anywhere they can be of service in baseball." And, when asked if he also thought a woman could be playing some day, he said, "Certainly. If she could add to my team's lineup, then she would play for me."

I knew playing in the majors would be a totally different experience for Isabel. These were men who did everything to succeed or to get an up on the other players. For example, the knuckleball was called the "dry spitter" because Eddie "Knuckles" Cicotte of the Chicago White Sox, the pitcher who is given credit for using the pitch for the first time in the 1900s, used the

knuckler as a companion for the then legal spit ball that he also threw.

Eddie also went on to pitch for the infamous Chicago Black Sox of 1919. It seems that throughout history, whenever someone invented something to use to get an edge, the law would come down to stop it. The spit ball, the sharpened cleats of Ty Cobb, the dirty play of the Gas House Gang, the gambling of the Black Sox and Pete Rose, up until the modern games with players taking steroids and other drugs to hit mammoth home runs and steal over 100 bases, the baseball authorities found a way to correct itself, so I wondered what would happen when and if Isabel became the first female player in the game? What would stop them from banning the knuckler? How would she stand the racist remarks, the physical confrontations at the plate and on the base paths, where pitchers in the National League had to come to bat, or the hazing from the fans and from the press?

I was thinking about all these things and more when I entered Larry Masters' office to negotiate Isabel's contract. In a wise move, Masters had banned all the press from being anywhere on the premises, so at least we could talk in private.

Masters, who was also a member of corporate boards of directors, the University of California Board of Regents, and, of course, president and CEO of his own successful computer company, Y-Shield, knew how to negotiate, and he also knew that he wanted Isabel. He knew that even if my client failed to make it in the big leagues, she would still be worth a lot of money

at the turnstiles. It would be worth the risk, in other words, to do what was needed to get her on the team.

He was seated behind his big mahogany desk, with his loafers up and a cigar in his mouth. He was a big man, over six foot five, and he had played college ball, so his body was still trim and fit. There were telltale circles under his eyes, however, which was the mark of a man whose team was in last place in the standings. This was another good negotiating signal for my side. He motioned with his hand for me to sit in the leather chair in front of him.

"That's good. We'll save the handshake for later," said Masters, running a hand through his thinning blonde hair. "Let's hear what's on the table, Mister Wilmington. I'm a busy man."

"Sir, did you know that the Washington Senators, during the war year of 1945, had four pitchers in their starting rotation who combined for 60 victories and 60 complete games? They needed something to equalize their staff, and they found it. They also finished in second place. As you know today, there are only two knuckleball pitchers in the major leagues, Tim Wakefield on the Red Sox and Charlie Haeger on the White Sox—both in the American League."

"That's very interesting. But what does it have to do with Miss Velasquez?" Masters moved his cigar to the other side of his mouth and

puffed deeply. I wanted badly to ask him to put it out, as I was getting a bit nauseous, but I didn't want to lose my momentum.

"Well, sir, my client, Isabel Velasquez, will give you a knuckleball pitcher who has been successful at the professional level for two years. In addition, she will be the first-ever woman signed to a contract by a major league team. I can see the San Diego Padres organization becoming part of history. The Padres will go down as the first team to break the sexist barrier in baseball. Not only that, but when she's successful on the mound, as I'm certain you'll see, the sponsors will also sign her up by the droves. That will be a real boon for a small market team like yours. In fact, look at Anna Kournakova in tennis. She is a mediocre player, yet she is famous the world over for her photo shoots in all the major magazines. My client, also, has that kind of feminine appeal. She is a story of fortitude, as well, playing her way out of a poverty-stricken pueblo in Merida to enter the best baseball organization in America, the San Diego Padres!"

He was sold. Thus, after she had made her mark as the pitcher with the most victories and the lowest earned run average, for a single season in Mexican League history, I had negotiated for her a ten million dollar, one year contract with the San Diego Padres. I even got to add her brother, Alfonzo, into the deal. He was the only catcher on the team who could manage Izzie's difficult knuckleballs, so he was included, along with his gigantic catcher's glove, in the most historic baseball signing in history. The

only item Izzie wanted was to have the uniform number seven. She said it was a good luck number for her people. Not since owner Branch Rickey convinced the young Black infielder, Jackie Robinson, to play for his Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, was there a greater interest in a story by the press and by the entire baseball world.

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Isabel was a success on the mound because she was able to perfect her delivery of the knuckleball so that it came at the batter from entirely different arm angles. She had such control over the pitch that she could throw it directly over the top, side-arm, three-quarters, and, miraculously, even submarine-style, almost completely underhanded. The spin on the ball was what the experts said was her "magic." They recorded her delivery in slow motion, and what they determined was that she was able to put a variety of slight rotations on the ball, which in turn caused the ball to dip, dart, float, curve and even move in two different directions. Tim Wakefield, the knuckleball pitcher for the Boston Red Sox, analyzed the videos and said, "I don't know how she does it. I didn't know the ball could move that way."

It was this comment by Wakefield that got me doing some research into the Mayan religion. I knew that the Mayans had never entirely given up all their practices, and they only accommodated the Mexican Government by seemingly mixing their ancient pagan rituals with Catholicism. I really didn't

know much about Isabel, and it was her magical ability to throw a perfect knuckleball that concerned me the most. Even though she was able to strike out batters with utmost consistency, she had made no wild pitches, and her brother had no passed balls against him while catching her. This was unbelievable to baseball veterans. The fact that the knuckleball was so unpredictable in its trajectory kept it from most pitchers' repertoires. I wanted to solve the mystery of this small woman's control over the most baffling pitch in baseball.

My first clue came when I discovered a "game" that the ancient Mayans played. The famous Mayan pyramids of Chichen-Itza are over 1,500 years old and are located only 75 miles from Merida. I drove out there on one of my visits to Isabel's village. She had begun to rebuild her pueblo with her contract money. There was a new school, air conditioning, full electrical access, new all-electric kitchens for each family, as well as the iPods, cell phones and other extras that Isabel said she wanted her *familia* to enjoy. It seemed her money was being well spent. Many professional athletes I represent piss their money away on themselves, and I was impressed that Isabel was true to her word even after becoming one of the richest women in Mexico.

Just beyond *El Castillo*, the largest pyramid of the group, I came upon a large ball court where Mayan men played a game called *pok ta pok*. Anthropologists believe that the object of the game was to hurl a ball

through a ring that was mounted on a wall, seven meters above the ground. It sounded a lot like what Dr. James Naismith invented for the game of basketball. However, that's where the resemblance ended. Each team had six field players who would attempt to pass the ball--using any body part except their hands--to their captain who would attempt the shot using a racket of sorts. The captain of the team that made the first successful shot was then decapitated as a sacrifice to the gods. This was seen as an honor and guaranteed entrance into heaven. That's what we call in sports "extreme dedication."

It was this kind of dedication that bothered me about Isabel. Had she become so dedicated because she believed she was going to heaven? We had fanatical dedication by terrorists who learned to fly giant passenger jets into buildings. Why couldn't a little Mayan woman dedicate herself spiritually to be able to throw a baseball with accuracy?

This is what I believed until the final game of the World Series, when Isabel struck out twenty-six Boston Red Sox batters out of a possible twenty-seven, in the seventh and final game, and won her third game, to seal the Padres' first World Series championship in franchise history. It was the most strikeouts in baseball history, but when designated hitter David Ortiz hit a knuckleball over the Petco Porch for Boston's only run of the game, Izzie, either out of exhaustion or relief, fell down on the mound, and Padres manager Bud Black had to bring in a reliever to finish the game.

I wanted to visit her in her special locker-room after the game. She had a policy that I wrote into her contract, which said she would have a private dressing room and that she would not be bothered by any of the media, before or after any game, at home or on the road. However, she granted me permission, and I was grateful.

Isabel's special room was a strange affair. It snaked inside Petco Park like a journey inside the narrow passageway of *El Castillo*. Inside the pyramid, one will find a narrowly enclosed staircase that leads to a *chac mool*, an altar where offerings to the gods were placed. I had an offering to the goddess that day. I had a tentative agreement from the Padres to give Isabel a contract for five years, at twelve million dollars per year, which almost matched Barry Zito of the San Francisco Giants, who got a seven-year, 126 million dollar deal. I, indeed, felt like I was entering the shrine of a goddess that day.

"Hey, Isabel! Great game!" I said, as I entered her dressing room. She was still glistening from her shower, and she wore a delicately flowered, brocaded blouse with an orange skirt, and her long earrings especially fascinated me. They were gold replicas of the Plumed Serpent God, Kukulcán. "Guess what I just got for you? It's an offer for 60 million dollars over five years. Think of all the good you can do with *that*, little Miss Knuckles!"

Izzie immediately became morose. She walked over to me and took both of my hands into hers. I could see tears welling up in the corners of her beautiful brown eyes. "I am so sorry, Mister Wilmington. You have been so kind to me and my family. But I cannot agree to this contract."

I was, obviously, amazed and dumbfounded. "But why? How could you pass up such a deal? What's wrong with you? Are you nuts?"

"It's not your fault. You've done all you can for me and my family, and we will always be grateful, but I must give up baseball. That is all I can tell you." Isabel picked up her purse and walked toward the exit. She did not turn back, and that was to be the last I would ever see of her. The only person I ever saw again was her brother, the catcher of her famous knuckleball, Alfonzo.

After Isabel disappeared from the team, never to be seen again, Alfonzo was soon dropped back to the Lions in Yucatan. He only hit .117 in the big leagues, and he had no more special purpose, so the club let him go. I ran into him under the strangest conditions.

I was down in Yucatan scouting a young player for the Lions named Victor Morales, and we got a scare that a hurricane would hit very soon. Therefore, I took refuge in the *cantina* of the hotel where the Velazquez family worked, the *Hacienda Xcanatun*. I saw Alfonzo at a table drinking beers with Joe Meister, the pitcher who taught Izzie to throw her knuckler. They were laughing and speaking Spanish, so I thought I would join them.

Joe kept buying the beers, and we were pretty wrecked by the time the all-clear came over the television in the bar. I was still curious about Izzie, so I asked Joe to translate for me. I wanted to know if he knew how her sister was able to control her pitches so well, and if he knew where she had disappeared to.

His manner became very dark and sinister, and he was quite drunk. He stood up with his beer and began to rave like a madman. Until I die, I will never forget his words that night. Joe Meister quit drinking that night, and I stare at my calendar, each and every day, waiting for the year 2012.

Joe's translation of Alfonzo's words were especially creepy, as his eyes began to grow wider after each sentence, and I just knew he was going to break down before he could complete the story. You can believe it, or not, but I must believe it, since I have no evidence to refute it.

"Mister Wilmington, you were at the ball court at *El Castillo*, no? There is a certain mystical energy about the ball court that begs to be experienced first-hand. One fact worth noting is the repetition of the number seven, which is sacred to our people. That is why my sister wanted to wear it on her uniform. There were seven players on a team, the rings were seven meters high and if you clap your hands or shout in the court, the sound will echo exactly seven times. There are carvings on the stone walls that depict the ball players, and after the captain is beheaded, seven serpents grow out of his neck."

Other people in the room had now moved around Alfonzo to listen, transfixed. They have heard many myths from these crazy, drunken Indians, but this one sounded quite interesting. Alfonzo's voice was loud, and he was sweating profusely, and, as the lightning and thunder boomed outside, we were all mesmerized in silent wonder.

"But the true mystery behind the ball court at Chichen-Itza is the Mayan prophecy that on December 22, 2012, the great warrior serpent Kukulcán will rise from the ground beneath the playing field and end the world for good. My sister gambled with the great Kukulcán. She thought she could stop the catastrophe from happening, but she could not. During her first visit to Chichen-Itza, which occurred just after she met Joe at the hotel, she made a deal with the god to get her the magic control over her knuckleball. That's why she called it the "kukulkanball." But then, after she saw how really good she was, she thought she could save the world. Just before the World Series with the Red Sox, my sister visited the top of *El Castillo* for the last time, and the great warrior god once more paid her a visit. She promised the great Kukulcán that she would strike-out twenty-seven batters in the seventh game of the World Series if he would agree not to come back on December 22, 2012."