

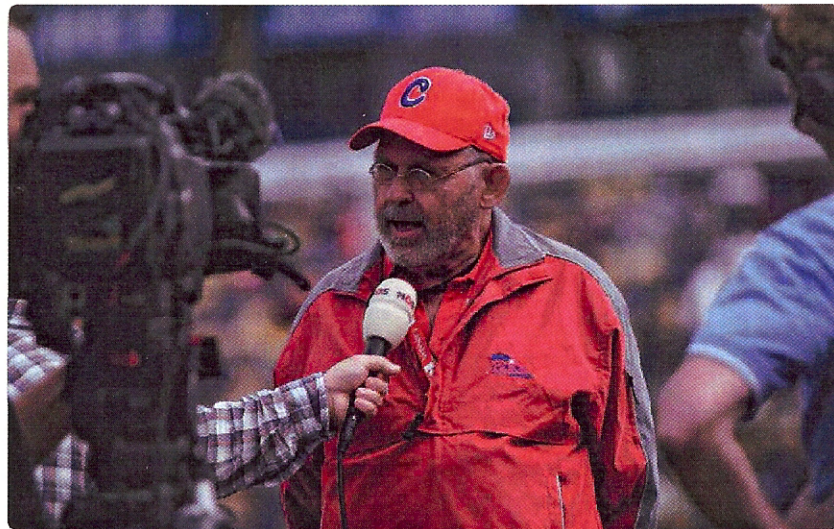
CELEBRATED DUTCH EMERGENCE IN BASEBALL'S UPPER ECHELONS MAY PROVE BITTERSWEET

THE ORANGEMEN ARRIVE AT THE PINNACLE OF INTERNATIONAL BASEBALL

by Peter C. Bjarkman

De Amerikaan Peter C. Bjarkman staat te boek als een groot kenner van het Cubaanse béisbol. Maar door zijn jarenlange komst naar de toernooien in Haarlem en Rotterdam is hij bijna net zo goed op de hoogte van de ontwikkelingen in het Nederlandse honkbal als van die in het Cubaanse. Voor hem was de machtsgreep van Oranje op het WK in Panama dan ook minder een verrassing dan voor de meeste andere volgers. In bijgaande beschouwing legt hij uit waarom.

decade of a new century, a result not only of the unprecedented Dutch surge but also of the recent slump in international play suffered by former Asian giants Japan, Korea and Chinese Taipei. While the big three national clubs



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The most engaging and surprising story on the international baseball scene during 2011 has to be the arrival of the Dutch Orangemen as new reigning International Baseball Federation world champions. Defeating perennial World Cup powerhouse Cuba twice in Panama in late October – including a rain-plagued 2-1 thriller in the tournament finale – the proud Dutch club walked off with their first-ever major international crown. In the process the Netherlands not only became the first European club to claim top IBAF honors but also the first European outfit ever to reach the gold medal match of either a World Cup or Olympic baseball round-robin event. The closest previous effort was the Dutch team's near-miss 2005 World Cup semifinal loss to South Korea on native soil in Rotterdam.

On the heels of their stunning World Cup victory in Panama City, the Orangemen now share the world spotlight with the Cubans, Americans and Canadians at the pinnacle of the international baseball pecking order. The old world order of international baseball indeed seems finally to be shifting its center of gravity at the close of the first

from the Orient continue to supply a healthy quota of major league talent that far outstrips any European country, no Oriental representative has fared particularly well in IBAF-sponsored events in the three years since Korea's 2008 Olympic gold medal victory in Beijing. The upstart Dutch team, by stark contrast, has now charged to the prestigious finals in each of the two most recent top-level world tournaments – the swansong Intercontinental Cup staged in Taiwan last November (where the Dutch forces suffered a nail-biting 4-1 loss to Cuba) and this fall's thirty-ninth (and

perhaps final) World Cup hosted by the Panamanians. In the light of such 2010 and 2011 successes, for the first time ever the Dutch baseballers can now boast of being far more than merely year-in and year-out champions of what many still see as a watered down European baseball confederation.

THE MOST TALENTED AND CONSISTENT OVERALL ROSTER THE DUTCH HAD EVER FIELDED

Victory in Panama was especially sweet for the Netherlanders since it came in head-to-head showdowns with their long-time fierce rivals, the long-acknowledged international front-runners from Cuba. Cuba's own World Cup heritage is one of the sport's most remarkable legacies: 25 total gold medal finishes in 31 outings, nine consecutive titles between 1984 and 2005, no finish below second place since 1951, and 311 single games victories in 346 outings. Runners-up to the Americans in 2007 (Taiwan) and 2009 (Europe), the experienced Cubans were heavily favored in most quarters to reclaim a title they had not owned since their 2005 victory over South Korea on Dutch soil in Rotterdam. But after edging the pesky Netherlanders in their last major showdown November 2010 in Taipei City, the Cubans simply couldn't master superior Dutch hurling this time around, dropping consecutive clashes in the span of less than a week. The hefty Cubans had battered opposition pitching throughout three tournament rounds, winning ten contests overall and outscoring the overmatched opposition by a lopsided 54-6 margin in seven pool round contests. But in consecutive medal round outings against Dutch starters Orlando Yntema (with relief help from Canadian native Leon Boyd in the 4-1 round two win) and Rob Cordemans (who allowed but two hits and a single tally in seven-plus frames during the final), the Caribbean forces could never muster a serious rally and thus dropped back-to-back matches to a European squad for the first time ever in more than a half-century of major tournament outings.

The Dutch performance in Panama was solid from start to finish and demonstrated beyond doubt that the Netherlanders could now play on a level field with any of the world's more traditional powerhouse teams representing North America, Asia and the baseball-saturated Caribbean. The lone Dutch loss came to Canada in the form of an 11-inning 5-4 thriller decided by the highly controversial IBAF extra-inning tie-breaker rule. The Dutch handled a disappointing American squad (7-5) and also registered impressive wins against Venezuela (12-2), Puerto Rico (5-0) and host Panama (7-3). Relying on a veteran mound staff anchored by Cordemans, Boyd, Berry van Driel, David Bergman and Diegomar Markwell, the Netherlanders held opposing clubs (including potent Korea and pesky Australia) at two single tallies in three of four crucial quarterfinal round matches. But the showcase games were those with the storied Cubans who had seemed to own the Dutch forces in so many close matches in the past. The first meeting was closer than the score 4-1 indicated, the match decided by a pair of two run blasts by veteran mainstay Bryan Engelhardt and first-time national teamer Kallian Sams. The final was one of the closest gold matches in tournament history, victory coming only when Orange third sacker Jonathan Schoop speared a vicious line drive (a potential game-saving two base hit) by pinch hitter Héctor Olivera with the potential deciding runs poised at first and second base. The Dutch emergence in the top echelon of global baseball powers is the happy result of long and steady progress over most of the past decade. The Netherlanders have long boasted Europe's top baseball tradition, featuring a semi-professional domestic league (Hoofdklasse) with roots in the shadows of the Second World War, two of Europe's finest baseball-only stadiums (located in Rotterdam and Haarlem), and a pair of world-class international tournaments (World Port Tournament and Haarlemse Honkbal Week) staged

on alternating years. The geographically compact nation has dominated European championships over four decades, winning a first title in 1956 and more than doubling their closest rival, Italy, in gold medal victories (with 20).

The first strong signal of an emerging international powerhouse came with a semifinal appearance at the 2005 World Cup event, hosted by the Dutch themselves. The steadily improving Dutch squads under managers Robert Eenhoorn and Rod Delmonico (an American import) showed well in two inaugural World Baseball Classics. The only major setback was suffered at the 2008 Beijing Olympics (a single victory in seven pool-round games). But the 2010 Intercontinental Cup seemed to signal the Dutch were finally ready to hang tough against the best of seasoned opponents. And there was certainly no letdown or setback in Panama where Brian Farley (another American recruit) flawlessly directed a ball club that was easily the most talented and consistent overall roster the Dutch had ever fielded.

Farley's underrated and overachieving Dutch squad not only shocked the Cubans, Americans and Canadians in Panama, but they also put the lie to numerous home front critics who for years have repeatedly claimed that The Netherlands would likely never emerge as a true power, capable of

THE DUTCH COULD NOW PLAY ON A LEVEL FIELD WITH ANY OF THE WORLD'S TRADITIONAL POWERHOUSE TEAMS

competing on a level playing field with the North American or Caribbean outfits. Author Josh Chetwynd

(capsulizing Dutch baseball history in his volume *Baseball in Europe*, 2008) quotes former national team head coach Harvey Shapiro (yet another American imported to strengthen the local game) as observing that 'since it is a small country, with a limited pool of baseball players from which to choose, along with inclement weather and the dominance of soccer, Dutch baseball will be hard pressed to reach higher levels. 'While acknowledging the major boast provided by baseball-savvy athletes imported from the Dutch Antilles,

DUTCH NATIONAL TEAM RESULTS IN IBAF INTERNATIONAL AND INTERCONTINENTAL EVENTS DURING THE 2000s

Years	Events	Locations	Records	Finishes	Medals
2000	IBAF Olympic Games	Sydney	2-5	Fifth Place	None
2001	IBAF World Cup	Taiwan	4-4	Lost Quarterfinals	None
2002	Intercontinental Cup	Havana	2-3	Pool Elimination	None
2003	IBAF World Cup	Havana	3-3	Pool Elimination	None
2004	Olympic Games	Athens	2-5	Pool Elimination	None
2005	IBAF World Cup	Netherlands	8-2	Lost Semifinals	None
2006 Spring	MLB World Classic	San Juan	1-2	Pool Elimination	None
2006 Fall	Intercontinental Cup	Taiwan	6-3	Lost Finals	SILVER
2007	IBAF World Cup	Taiwan	6-4	Lost Semifinals	None
2008	Olympic Games	Beijing	1-6	Seventh	None
2009 Spring	MLB World Classic	San Juan, Miami	2-3	Second Round	None
2009 Fall	IBAF World Cup	Europe	7-5	Sixth	None
2010	Intercontinental Cup	Taiwan	5-3	Lost Finals	SILVER
2011	IBAF World Cup	Panama	11-1	FIRST	GOLD

nonetheless Shapiro as late as 2006 still maintained 'it would not be realistic to think that baseball in the Netherlands could reach the echelon of a world baseball power.'

Cuba and The Netherlands boast a rich history of entertaining international clashes. The most recent showdown was a storybook clash at the final Intercontinental Cup October 2010 in Taiwan – a game decided only by Alexei Bell's clutch eighth-inning two-run homer off Berry van Driel. There have also been a number of memorable games between second-level national squads at recent editions of the Haarlemse Honkbal Week and World Port Tournament. In 2008 a Cuban Olympic team visiting Haarlem on route to Beijing enjoyed one of their stiffest matches versus the host Dutch, when a stellar relief performance by Yadier Pedrosa managed to salvage a hard-earned 4-1 victory in front of a raucous throng of Dutch supporters. Cuba's undefeated 2009 Rotterdam champions again faced the hosts in the finals and the 9-3 victory proved one of Cuba's best-ever outings on Dutch soil. At

Haarlem a year later the Dutch team handed a Cuba B squad an embarrassing 10-0 whitewash that represented the only recorded knockout loss suffered by a senior-level Cuban squad in a full half-century. Last summer in Rotterdam another Cuba B squad blanked the hosts twice (4-1, 2-0) as the result of a pair of masterful pitching performances (the first a complete-game six hitter) by top national team ace Yadier Pedrosa.

CAREFUL BUILDING OF A SUSTAINED NATIONAL TEAM INFRASTRUCTURE UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF ROBERT EENHOORN

Perhaps the clearest signal that the Dutch had arrived came in the spring of 2009 at the second edition of the MLB-sponsored World Baseball Classic. That Dutch squad was managed by Rod Delmonico, but the biggest inspirational boost undoubtedly came from pitching mentor Bert Blyleven, Holland's only native-born Cooperstown Hall of Famer. Under Blyleven's even-handed tutelage the Dutch staff handcuffed a lineup of

notable Dominican Major League sluggers to send one of the pre-tournament favorites packing and also earn a surprising second-round berth in Miami. The Dominican star-studded roster was admittedly a huge disappointment in San Juan and the Dutch victory – glorious as it was – may have been something of an aberration, resulting more from than anything from the Dominican's own less-than-inspired effort. The nip-and-tuck extra-inning tussle with Cuba in the 2006 Intercontinental Cup finals (a game the Dutch lead by a 2-1 count after six frames, only to lose via a bases-loaded triple off the bat of outfielder Yoandry Urgelles in the eleventh inning) was in every way a clearer marker of true Dutch emergence as an international club to be reckoned with.

There are several explanations for why this surge in Dutch baseball should be anything but a surprise. Foremost has been the careful building of a sustained national team infrastructure under the guidance of Rotterdam native Robert Eenhoorn and a trio of recent American coaching imports who have successfully

CARIBBEAN CONNECTION IN DUTCH BASEBALL MUST NOT BE DENIED OR DIMINISHED

served as national team managers (Delmonico, Jim Stoeckel and finally Brian Farley). First and foremost the Dutch have long sought top-level competition, mainly through development of the annual alternating Rotterdam and Haarlem tournaments that have consistently featured quality national squads from Cuba, Japan, Taipei and the United States to match up against Holland's national team rosters. Equally important has been the fact that Dutch baseball has always held a radically local flavor, emphasized mainly by its unique designation as *honkbal*: the sport was introduced in the environs of Amsterdam a full century back by local enthusiast J. C. G. Grase and thus never taken as a mere American import. It is also significant that in the shadows of World War II a number of top Dutch soccer players (notably Johan Cruyff, Johan Neeskens and Cor Wilders) took up the sport as a summertime conditioning activity and the country's top professional soccer clubs (Ajax and Sparta among them) also sponsored baseball teams as part of their sporting enterprise. Also a small but noteworthy heritage of Dutch MLB players has existed for nearly a full half-century: several 1950s-1960s-era Hoofdklasse stalwarts – most notably star pitcher Han Urbanus – attended big league spring training camps as part of their training in the sport. The first native-born and also home-trained Dutch big leaguer was cup-of-coffee pitcher Win Remmerswaal who hurled briefly for the Boston Red Sox at the end of the seventies. Robert Eenhoorn saw brief service across four seasons with the New York Yankees in the late nineties and Rikkert Faneyte played 80 games in the outfield with the San Francisco Giants during the same decade. Perhaps the most noteworthy European-born Dutch baseballer has been left-handed pitcher Alexander Smit, recipient of an \$800,000 signing bonus in 2002 from the American League Minnesota Twins. Over the past

decade such Antillean imports as Mariëkson Gregorius, Shairon Martis, Curt Smith, Kalian Sams, Juan Carlos Sulbaran and the brothers Jonathan and Sharon Schoop have further swelled the number of Netherlands citizens now employed by the North American professional baseball leagues. The Caribbean connection in Dutch baseball also must not be denied or even diminished. Integration of baseball-savvy imports from the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba has been crucial to the country's recent successes but actually stretches back through decades of Dutch baseball development. A significant proportion of the domestic league's top athletes come from this baseball hotbed region located near Venezuela, and early employment of talent from Curaçao and Aruba on some of the earliest Dutch European championship squads in the decade of the sixties stirred formal protests (eventually abandoned) by the rival Italian Baseball Federation.

EARLY ON THERE WAS THE REMARKABLE HAMILTON RICHARDSON

Early on there was the remarkable Hamilton Richardson, a seven-time Hoofdklasse batting champion and MVP player at the 1965 and 1973 European championships events. There were substantial contributions to the national team early in the first decade of the 2000s by Eugene Kingsale (Aruba), Raily Legito (Curaçao), Yurendell De Caster (Curaçao) and Randall Simon (also Curaçao) among others. Diegomar Markwell (Curaçao-born cousin of former big league star Andruw Jones) has been a noted pitching ace for a half-dozen seasons on the international level. Recent stars like pitcher Jair Jurjens (Curaçao), catcher Johnny Balentina (Curaçao) and outfielder Rogear Bernadina (Curaçao) have also further elevated the level of domestic and national team play.

The Dutch have also followed the Cuban model and kept their core team intact over a span of several years.

While other powers like the USA and Japan rely on top North American minor leaguers and patch their squads together only weeks before tournament action, the Dutch like the Cubans have continued to draw heavily on domestic league veterans and also maintained consistent national team rosters with a corps of *returnees* who have played side-by-side in numerous challenging international events. And like the Cubans they have mixed veterans with a constant supply of emerging fresh young stars. Much of the last decade has witnessed a consistent corps of Dutch league veterans anchored by catcher Sidney de Jong, infielders Ivanon Coffie, Michael Duursma and Raily Legito, and outfielders Eugene Kingsale, Dirk van 't Klooster and Danny Rombley. The pitching staff, especially, remained remarkably consistent with Cordemans, Markwell, Bergman and Michiel van Kampen hanging around for more than half a decade.

At the 2011 World Cup in Panama many of the longtime standbys had been replaced with young talent. Legito had given way to Jonathan Schoop at third base, the shortstop was now Mariëkson 'Didi' Gregorius, Curt Smith had taken over at first, and an additional pair of (former) minor league prospects named Dwayne Kemp and Kalian Sams were now roaming the outfield. The changes were remarkably productive since the familiar Dutch team had seemed to suffer from aging of late; Duursma, Legito and Vince Rooi had slowed in the infield, Randall Simon was no longer reliable at first base, and outfielders Kingsale and Van't Klooster (who holds a record for national team game appearances) were all at career's end. Thus an infusion of fresh pro prospects was a vital shot in the arm. Curt Smith was among the tournament leaders in both RBIs and runs scored, while



De Cubaanse catcher Ariel Pestano tikt Curt Smith uit.



Grote verslagenheid in de Cubaanse dug-out na de nederlaag tegen Nederland in de finale van het WK.

THE DUTCH HAVE FOLLOWED THE CUBAN MODEL AND KEPT THEIR CORE TEAM INTACT OVER A SPAN OF SEVERAL YEARS

brothers Jonathan (third base) and Sharon Schoop (second base) anchored an infield that paced the field in team defense. Nonetheless a few mainstays like De Jong behind the plate, Rombley in left field and Engelhardt in right field, and especially the arms of Cordemans, Bergman and the talented Tom Stuijbergen were also important elements in the winning formula.

In the end the Dutch have triumphed of late with their solid pitching – the normal key to short-schedule international tournament successes. This dominant pitching factor in the Dutch arsenal was most evident in Panama,

although plenty of earlier signs had emerged during WBC action in San Juan (in both 2006 and 2009) and also with recent Intercontinental Cup shootouts in Taiwan. In March 2006 Curaçao native minor leaguer Shairon Martis wrote headlines with his unique WBC no-hit, no-run (a knockout ten-run-rule shortened seven-inning game). Three years later in the same San Juan venue a contingent of seven different Dutch hurlers managed to hold a lineup of slugging Dominican big leaguers (including the likes of José Reyes, Hanley Ramirez, Robinson Cano and David Ortiz) to but three tallies in 20 innings of action, with Leon Boyd saving one contest and winning the other. Mound mastery of experienced Dutch hurlers was especially evident in the pair of recent World Cup victories over offense-minded Cuba. But the pitching was solid for the Dutch throughout the entire Panama event. While Cuba lead the event with a cumulative .343 team batting average (a fact which itself

underscores the achievements of Dutch pitching in the two Cuba matches), it was Team Netherlands that paced the tournament field with an overall sterling 1.65 earned run average. The celebrated Dutch arrival in baseball's upper echelons may unfortunately prove somewhat bittersweet since it regrettably comes at the very time when the international version sport may be about to transform itself quite beyond recognition. IBAF's Swiss headquarters has confirmed that Panama's World Cup 39 was indeed the last staging of a long-teetering event whose chaotic history stretches all the way back to the eve of the Second World War. Having also closed down its periodic Intercontinental Cup event, the

INFUSION OF FRESH PRO PROSPECTS WAS A VITAL SHOT IN THE ARM

cash-strapped IBAF will now focus exclusively on junior level events, women's competitions and its reduced role as co-sponsor of the Major League Baseball's World Baseball Classic. There also seems to be little if any hope for renewal of Olympic Games baseball venues. This all leaves the high-powered big-league WBC event (occurring only once every four years) as the only remaining top level multi-continent international tournament extravaganza. Whether the Dutch can manage to maintain their grip at or near the top of the heap may now have as much to do with the shifting external format of international play as with any on-the-field or talent-level factors. With their growing but still limited major league talent pool, will the Dutch forces be able to staff a squad capable of matching the rich professional talent boasted by the Americans, Canadians, Japanese, Taiwanese or Puerto Ricans? Will the Dutch national team – or the equally handicapped Cubans, for that matter – continue to maintain their year-in and year-out sharp edge, when now faced with a greatly reduced calendar of annual international top-level events?

MOUND MASTERY OF EXPERIENCED DUTCH HURLERS

And there are numerous additional challenges to be faced. The Cuban League (and thus the Cuban national team) miraculously continues to maintain its excellence and even to expand its talent level, despite that country's continued isolation from a worldwide professional baseball scene. Japan and South Korea might well be expected to focus renewed attention on their own international squads in the light of several recent World Cup embarrassments. The impressive showing of a highly disciplined young squad from Chinese Taipei at the 2011 World Port Tournament suggests continued excellence from a third Asian front. And Dutch baseball also faces its own substantial question marks on the domestic front. With IBAF events

waning and yet another FIFA soccer World Cup event looming on the horizon, will recent Dutch baseball euphoria quickly prove to have been little more than a temporary and unsustainable upsurge in the aftermath of such unexpected victory? It is more than likely that the jury is still out on all these intriguing issues. ●

Peter C. Bjarkman is author of A History of Cuban Baseball, 1864-2006 (McFarland, 2007) and is widely recognized as a leading authority on Cuban baseball, past and present. He has reported on Cuban League action and Cuba's national team as www.BaseballDeCuba.com senior writer during the past six years and is also currently completing a book on the history of the pre- and post-revolution Cuban national team.



Het is opgehouden met regenen, gravel heeft de plassen doen verdwijnen, Cuba's tweede catcher Frank Camilo Morejon fatsoeneert het slagperk.