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Conrado Marrero, who turned 100 in April, played against the Hall of Famer Martín Dihigo before coming to the United States to pitch for the Washington Senators.

Bridge to Cuba's Baseball Past

grabbed me by the shoulders. And then he would jog with me.

"But this joke about the home run is only a clever story. It never happened."

Conrado Marrero, the oldest former major leaguer, has not left the game behind him.

By PETER C. BJARKMAN

Conrado Marrero established himself as the most successful amateur league pitcher in Cuban history during the 1930s and early 1940s, then pitched for five seasons with the Washington Senators. Now the oldest former major leaguer at 100, he has fallen off the radar in North America.

Yet he remains an icon of baseball culture in Cuba, having helped to develop young players well into his 80s. He lives in a modest Havana apartment with his grandson Rogelio, and his birthdays are something of a national celebration. Despite a recent fall, Marrero still has a great memory, listens to games and enjoys discussing the best players in Cuba today.

He was born in a rural north-central district known as Sagua la Grande and began his baseball adventures on the farm that was his childhood home. The labor-intensive demands of his father's small sugar cane plantation severely limited and shaped his early athletic career. Marrero recalled his youth during a 1999 interview, the first of several we have conducted in Spanish over the years.

"I am and I always will be from the countryside and the fields," he said. "I struggled with my older brothers in the fields to help my father. There wasn't so much time for baseball. I learned to field balls with bare hands. And you know how I learned to throw a curveball? I practiced with big, soft oranges."

"I started as an infielder, playing at third base, but one day, I caught a bouncer in the face and lost some teeth. That was it for me. Pitching seemed easier and definitely much safer."

In those days, the all-white Cuban amateur circuit was much more popular than the racially integrated professional winter league based in Havana. The amateurs played games only on weekends, and they received well-paying token employment from enterprises that sponsored their clubs.

"I earned great fame pitching for the Cienfuegos club, and they paid me good," said Marrero, who was known in the United States as Connie. "With the national team in 1939, I was the first Cuban to beat the

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Marrero, who helped coach young ballplayers well into his 80s, had a 39-40 record for the Senators from 1950 to '54, and was an All-Star once.

Americans in the amateur world series. I had no need to be with the pro clubs in Havana. I never wanted to sign a contract.

"But then on two occasions, they suspended me from the Amateur Athletic Union league. It was because I was playing in some exhibition games on the side, which was against the rules. I had won 123 and lost only 39 in seven seasons, but they threw me out. I didn't have any choice, and then Reinaldo Cordeiro gave me a contract with the Chihuahua team in the Mexico League, and I went there in 1945 and won 28. That was how it started with the pros."

After three seasons with the Havana Cubans of the Class B Florida International League, where he had 70 victories, a no-hitter and a sub-2.00 earned run average, Marrero made his major league debut in 1950, four days before he turned 39. In 1951, he led the Senators with 11 victories and made the All-Star team. Marrero's unremarkable career record of 39-40 and his 3.67 E.R.A., however, were a product of his age and the team's hapless lineup.

Mention a teammate or an American League opponent, and Marrero, a right-hander, can offer pitch-by-pitch accounts of long-ago games. The tales are endless, but one he loves to repeat involves a supposed encounter with the Boston slugger Ted Williams.

"What everyone says is that I struck out



Williams and then asked him in the clubhouse to sign the ball I got him with," Marrero said. "Then the next time I pitched to him, he smacked a homer and yelled at me: 'O.K., Chico. Find that one and I will sign that one also.'"

"He always called me Chico. Williams was very friendly and always joked around with me. He often came up behind me in the field before the games with Boston and

Less than a decade after Marrero left the majors, cold war politics changed his homeland forever. And his decision to remain in Cuba after Fidel Castro seized power in 1959 had dire consequences. Marrero has struggled with Major League Baseball to collect a much-needed pension, but he has never seemed to regret staying at home and playing a role in building a new brand of postrevolution baseball.

When asked how he was able to coach on the field into his ninth decade, Marrero answered playfully.

"Well, because the work doesn't involve any running," he said. "I just chat with the guys. Grip the baseball sometimes. I even may toss the ball around with them and I tell them, 'You grip it like this, in this manner.' It's not like a few years back when I still pitched to them a lot in practice. But you simply have to make the effort. It is because I love my work."

Now, however, his working days are over. Marrero lost his eyesight over the past two years and uses a wheelchair.

Yet his passion for the game that has defined his life has never waned. Marrero sits beside the television and listens to every pitch of Cuban League games. And he is quick to share his opinions on Cuban players past and present, comparing them across the years.

"The game here today is better than ever," Marrero said. "We have great players, and many are the best I have ever seen."

Germán Mesa, a Cuban national team star in the 1980s and '90s, was "the best shortstop I ever saw here," he said, including his former Senators teammate Willy Miranda.

"Martín Dihigo, of course, was the best I ever saw," Marrero said, referring to a star Negro leaguer from the 1920s and '30s who is in the Hall of Fame. "But we have great baseball now, and it is part of the Cuban blood."

In February, the last time we spoke, Marrero took credit for helping to mold Alfredo Despaigne, the Cuban national team's top slugger.

"Despaigne is the best," he said. "You know I trained him when he was only 13. I went to the field every afternoon and tossed him maybe a hundred pitches. I made him into a hitter with an excellent swing."

Marrero, who played against the legendary Dihigo in his prime and was still heaving practice balls to a budding star in his late 80s, is a living link to a century of proud Cuban baseball tradition.

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