

Inside Baseball: This Yanqui Is Welcome in Cuba's Locker Room

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Peter Bjarkman Is an Expert, a Go-Between And, to Some Cuban-Americans, a Stooge

BY CHRISTOPHER RHOADS

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico—U.S. scouts at a baseball tournament here last month salivated over Cuban national team players potentially worth millions of dollars in the major leagues. To keep any of them from defecting, Cuban security restricted them to their hotel rooms between games.

But one American was allowed to visit them, coming and going as he pleased.

"The guards know me," explained Peter Bjarkman, a 69-year-old retired linguistics professor from Purdue University.

Some compare him with Ry Cooder, the American musician who brought Cuban music to the wider world, leading to the album and film the "Buena Vista

Social Club." Mr. Bjarkman has made more than 40 trips to Cuba over the past 15 years, reporting on the communist country's baseball, whose talent has about the same illicit thrill as a Cuban cigar.

But others, particularly Cubans who have become U.S. citizens, see him differently—as a shill for the Cuban government.

"This guy is a friend and a defender of the revolution and the dictator himself," read a comment on one of his articles posted on a Cuban website. "Sounds

like the communists have infiltrated" the U.S., wrote a reader.

Such critics consider him akin to John Reed, the controversial American journalist whose leftist sympathies allowed him into the Bolshevik inner circle to

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Peter Bjarkman

A Yanqui Who Knows Cuban Baseball

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chronicle the 1917 Russian Revolution.

A few Americans knowledgeable about Cuban baseball are no longer on speaking terms with him.

"Bjarkman echoes government propaganda, so I have nothing to say about him," says Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, a literature professor at Yale who grew up in Cuba and wrote a history of the game.

The bespectacled Mr. Bjarkman, who lives in Lafayette, Ind., with his second wife and two cats, says he's interested in Cuban baseball, not politics.

"It's a wonderful, alternative baseball universe," he says, citing the lack of commercialism, free agency and high ticket prices that mark the modern U.S. game. He says its pastoral nature recalls American baseball of the 1950s, when he was growing up following the Brooklyn Dodgers.

What is not in dispute is his access to the Cuban baseball scene and his position within it—perhaps unparalleled for an American in any field, given that the U.S. trade embargo, in place since 1962, restricts U.S. business and travel in Cuba.

He mingles freely with top Cuban players on the field before games, sometimes visiting them in their homes.

Photos of him adorn the lobby wall of the Havana hotel where he stays. Excerpts from his two books on the Cuban game have run in the Communist Party newspaper *Granma*.

"Everyone knows Pete here, from the baseball commissioner to the guy who sells tickets," says Ismael Sene, a retired Cuban diplomat who has a weekly baseball show on Havana television.

Mr. Bjarkman was a high-school English teacher in Hart-

ford, Conn. in the 1960s, when he got the bug to explore Latin America.

He taught school in Colombia and Ecuador, becoming fluent in Spanish, and later got his Ph.D. in linguistics, specializing in Cuban Spanish.

But his career floundered, he says, after he arrived at Purdue as a linguistics professor in 1979. He found he had little enthusiasm for writing in his chosen field.

In the late-1980s, he began writing short histories of sports teams, often for young readers. Next came a history of Latin American baseball.

That book caught the attention of Mark Rucker, a collector of rare baseball photographs who wanted to try an illustrated book on Cuban baseball.

It was not long after a baseball strike canceled the 1994 World Series, and a disillusioned Mr. Bjarkman was eager to satisfy his baseball passion elsewhere.

The pair's biggest challenge on their research trips to Cuba in the late-1990s—beyond cows appearing on the island's unlit highways—was gaining the cooperation of Cuban authorities.

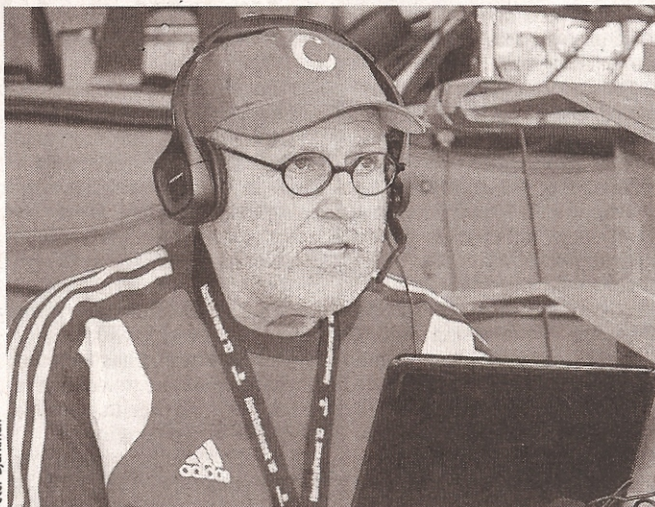
The timing was sensitive because several prominent players had recently defected to the U.S.

Cuban officials weren't pleased when the book came out in 1999. The reason: It contained two photographs of defectors, including Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez, who had become a star pitcher for the New York Yankees. Defectors didn't get official mention in Cuba.

"We never would've put those in there if the publisher hadn't requested it," says Mr. Bjarkman.

Nevertheless, the book began to circulate underground in Cuba.

Mr. Sene, the retired Cuban diplomat, passed around copies



Peter Bjarkman

Mr. Bjarkman providing play-by-play commentary for a Cuban game at the Baseball Week tournament in Haarlem, Netherlands, in July.

at games, attracting curious crowds. Then he introduced Mr. Bjarkman as the author, and Mr. Bjarkman's stature grew.

Officials began treating him as a regular member of the Cuban media. He appeared on Cuban television to talk baseball, indicating, he says, that he was trusted. Today, U.S. scouts consult him about Cuban players, given his unique access.

"Pete has to walk a tightrope to do that job," says Mr. Rucker, who collaborated with him on the illustrated book.

But critics think he has sacrificed credibility to maintain his standing in Cuba, such as by trashing players after they defect.

After Cuban pitcher Aroldis Chapman defected last year to sign with the Cincinnati Reds for \$30 million, Mr. Bjarkman wrote about the pitcher's inconsistency and limited pitch variety and said that Mr. Chapman "had considerable trouble even qualifying" for the national team.

Before the player defected, Mr. Bjarkman had described him

in his online column as a "stellar flamethrower" and a "phenom" likely to be the No. 2 starter on the Cuban team.

"Cubans who read his column are fed up with it," says Roberto Moralejo, a 30-year-old civil engineer in Miami who left Cuba 11 years ago.

He says Mr. Bjarkman ignores the hardships of the Cuban players, such as meager salaries of around \$125 a month.

Mr. Bjarkman says he was trying to temper enthusiasm in the U.S. for the young pitcher by providing some balance.

Still, he admits he hates seeing Cuban players leave.

"It's a beautiful baseball experience," says Mr. Bjarkman, who acknowledges his politics lean to the left. "And I don't want to see it fall apart from U.S. teams strip-mining it for talent."

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