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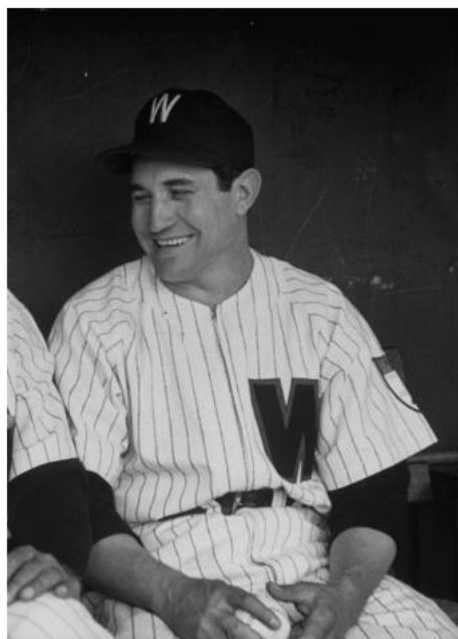
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Connie Marrero

by **Peter C. Bjarkman**

One of Cuba's grandest baseball legends reached another significant milestone when Conrado Marrero (born April 25, 1911) turned a robust ninety-nine in the spring of 2010. The last living Cuban big leaguer from pre-revolution days has been quietly residing at the modest Havana apartment of his grandson Rogelio for most of the past decade. While well into his late eighties, the indefatigable island legend was still serving as a part-time pitching coach for the Cuban League team in Granma Province. His last notable public appearance came when he tossed a ceremonial first pitch for the landmark May 1999 Team Cuba-Baltimore Orioles exhibition match in Havana's equally venerable Latin American Stadium.



Marrero's birthday milestone placed him among a small collection of baseball's most durable veteran survivors. Cup-of-coffee Brooklyn Dodgers infielder Tony Malinosky (who reached the century mark on October 5, 2009) is senior to the colorful Cuban icon by less than 18 months. Other centenarian major leaguers include Chester (Red) Hoff (107), Bob Wright (101), Karl Swanson (101), Johnny Daley (101), Bill Otis (100), Milt Gaston (100), Ralph Miller (100), Ed Gill (100), Charlie Emig (100), Ralph Erickson (100), Ray Cunningham (100), Howard Groskloss (100), Rollie Stiles (100), and Bill Werber (100). If the ancient Cuban survives another year he will become only baseball's sixteenth-ever living centenarian.

To aging North American fans, Marrero is remembered exclusively for his five brief seasons with the American League also-ran Washington Senators, the team he joined in 1950 as a grizzled 39-year-old rookie. It has often been reported that Washington owner-manager Clark Griffith erroneously believed Marrero was born in 1919 instead of 1911 when he signed him on, but that part of the legend is probably only apocryphal. Marrero was nonetheless anything but a novelty act during his Washington years, featuring one of the league's most devastating curves and claimed repeatedly by manager Bucky Harris to be the most valuable "stopper" on an otherwise lamentable Washington mound corps. "Connie Marrero had a windup that looked like a cross between a windmill gone berserk and a mallard duck trying to fly backwards," once noted Dominican slugger Felipe Alou. But it was always the issue of his age (more even than his huge cigars or funky delivery) that remained the Cuban's most notable calling card.

For stateside partisans whose memories stretch back a full half-

Given Name: **Conrado Eugenio (Ramos)**

DOB: **4/25/1911**

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century, it is nearly impossible to separate Marrero from nostalgic memories of one of the Fabulous Fifties' most charismatic yet inept teams. Marrero seemed, in fact, to epitomize Clark Griffith's entire stable of sad sack Washington Senators. There was plenty of raw talent to be sure in the magical arm of the fire-plug-shaped¹ Cuban right-hander—as there was in those of fellow countrymen and Washington teammates Camilo Pascual and Pedro Ramos—but the more entertaining story for beat writers and their readers was always in the end his oversized Havana cigars, his laughter-provoking slaughtered-English phrases, and his whirling-dervish high-kicking delivery while launching the league's most tantalizing slider and curveball.

The stogie, the thick Spanish accent and the elaborate windmill windup were trademark realities that merged rapidly into all-too-familiar stereotypes. In the large scheme of things Conrado Marrero was little more than a blip on the screen of baseball's golden age fifties so dominated by names like Mantle, Musial, Williams, Spahn, Mays and Banks. But from yet another perspective, the American League Washington Senators and the whole enterprise of big league baseball were themselves, in turn, but a mere blip in the baseball-playing career of the seemingly ageless and remarkably durable Conrado Marrero.

Scouting legend Joe Cambria may have (in folk tale at least) missed out on one overblown phenom named Fidel Castro, but he hit the mark squarely when it came to the pursuit and signing of another colorful cigar-puffing mound legend whose heroic stature in today's Cuba is nearly as large as that of the Maximum Leader himself.² Foremost on the local-color scale among Papa Joe Cambria's Fabulous Fifties Washington recruits was a junk-balling, stogie-smoking roly-poly known in his homeland by such poetic handles as *El Guajiro de Labertino* (The Labertino Peasant or Labertino Hillbilly), *El Premier* (Grade A or Number One) and *El Curveador* (The Curveballer).

Those Cuban nicknames were quickly matched by Washington's epithet-wielding sports hacks who came up with such beauties as "Conrado the Conqueror", the "Cuban Perfecto" (referring to a popular cigar brand), or simply "Chico"—that most timeworn and degrading pseudonym for Latin ballplayers of almost any era. He pitched for only five seasons in the big time and lost more games (forty) than he won (thirty-nine). His reputation was that of a mystifying craftsman who tantalized hitters with off-speed deliveries and was always far more successful against the less-talented junior circuit clubs. Marrero outright owned Mr. Mack's weak-hitting Athletics, as well as the pathetic Browns in St. Louis and dysfunctional Tigers of Detroit. And he bore the further reputation of a spunky artisan who proved most unhittable in early-season outings, when he was coming fresh off a full winter league season back home in Havana and was thus seemingly several weeks if not months ahead of most still-rusty springtime hitters.

Conrado Marrero inevitably became simply "Connie" for Washington ball fans and beat writers, just as fellow Cubans Roberto Ortiz and Roberto Estalella inevitably became "Bobby", while Miguel Angel González and Miguel Guerra likewise were both "Mike" to monolingual and condescending stateside sportswriters. Whatever the designation at the time, Marrero is today hardly a household name anywhere north of Miami. Yet for Cuban fans Marrero still remains the closest thing there is to a native big league legend. Indeed Adolfo Luque enjoyed greater big league successes back in the twenties and thirties with nearly two hundred National League victories and a dominant 1923 season for Cincinnati's second-place Reds. Blackball nonpareil Martín Dihigo built a legacy in the Cuban and Mexican winter circuits and the U.S. Negro leagues sufficient to merit a permanent home in Cooperstown. Pascual, Ramos, Miñoso, Campaneris, and Versalles were all more accomplished major leaguers. And Cuban-born José Canseco and Rafael Palmeiro are modern-era stars of far loftier



proportions. But none before or since has matched Conrado Marrero's combined fame in *Las Grandes Ligas* (the U.S. major leagues) and unsurpassed baseball stature on his native island, for Marrero is the most celebrated and admired amateur pitcher in the century-long saga of Cuba's own national game.

Marrero's badge as a short-haul big leaguer was his advanced age and his irrepressibly colorful style. On-field he was a sneaky-fast curveballer known for his exceptional control and infallible mastery of the strike zone. Off the field he was a genuine homespun character who puffed monster cigars, wisecracked with reporters in broken English (which of course endeared him to fifties-era journalists whose portrayals often bordered on racist in tone), and seemed to love every spontaneous moment spent in the clubhouse spotlight.

And there was, of course, always the mystery surrounding his advanced age. His 1953 Topps bubblegum card listed his birthplace and birth date as Las Villas on May 1, 1915, and the Washington Senators own yearbooks and published roster sheets of the period opted for May 1, 1917 (making Marrero just shy of thirty-three as a rookie); but reports that Marrero had pitched for as many as eighteen seasons in the Cuban amateur league before signing up with Joe Cambria and interning with the Senators' Havana affiliate in the Class B Florida International League (beginning in 1947) fueled much speculation that he might be as much as a full decade older. Writing in *The Saturday Evening Post* in August 1952, journalist Collie Small stoked the controversy by reporting that the wily hurler had at various times reported that he was "positively thirty-five, absolutely thirty-seven, indisputably forty-three, and definitely forty-two"—yet when pressed for details always coyly admitted (with appropriate amounts of journalistically jumbled foreign idiom) only that "Me old enough, but me not too old."

Marrero was hardly the first Latin recruit to either add or subtract years from his résumé (a practice attaching to such current-era Cuban big leaguers as Orlando Hernández and Rey Ordóñez, who were both several years older than claimed by Miami agent Joe Cubas and late-1990s New York Yankees and New York Mets press guides). And the practice is not one limited to Caribbean diamond recruits either. Dizzy Dean invented a rash of fanciful tales regarding his natal circumstances (both place and year) and also his given name (was it Jerome Herman or Jay Hanna?), feeding eager reporters precisely the scoops they were so anxious to hear. "Them ain't lies, them is scoops," bubbled the effusive Diz when pressed on the matter.

For Marrero the true date of birth would eventually turn out to be April 25, 1911 (and the birthplace was Sagua La Grande), making him an even ninety in the second spring of the new millennium, a well-heeled thirty-one when he enjoyed his most glamorous career moment in the storied Amateur World Series showdown with Venezuela in 1941, and an absolutely ancient thirty-nine at the hour of his big league debut.

Connie Marrero's big league sojourn was always more a matter of homespun folklore than of Cooperstown legend. Here was a pitcher who often baffled enemy hitters with his herky-jerky motions and time-lapse deliveries yet spent nearly as much time baffling fans and the local press with his garbled witticisms. Most of the amusing stories in the Washington newspapers and national sporting magazines might today—a full half-century later—be viewed as blatant racism of an all-too-familiar type that has dogged all Spanish-speaking ballplayers up to the recent hour (in August 2005 a San Francisco broadcaster was suspended for labeling the hometown Giants' band of Latino "airhead free-swingers" as responsible for that club's mid-season swoon). But even if stilted by their stylized lingo and the journalist's eagerness to make a humorous figure of his popular subject, the accounts of Marrero's lighter moments with the press still make delightful enough reading.



There is, for example, an account found in now-yellowing pages of *The Saturday Evening Post* featuring a typical Marrero response to a Dizzy Dean critique of the ancient Cuban's pitching style. When broadcaster Dean suggested over the airwaves that batters would be well advised to wait out the sawed-off Cuban because he had nothing more going than the ability to keep hitters off stride, Marrero had a bemused post-game response: "Deezy Dean, he good peetcher, hokay peetcher, but no more. Deezy he peetch too much. He peetch one day, Deezy brother Pablo peetch next day, Deezy peetch again. Cardinals win championsheep of pennant, but Deezy he no peetch now. Peetch too much. Me rest plenty. Me still peetch." (A sad attempt at Spanish-tinged mispronunciations here represents the typical offerings of *Post* columnist Collie Small.)

There is also the likely more-or-less accurate quip regarding the belittling of his talents by big league skipper and Hall-of-Fame batsman Rogers Hornsby. When Marrero on one of his especially effective days whitewashed Hornsby's inept St. Louis Browns 2-0 on four harmless hits in the spring of 1952 (May 21 in Sportsman's Park), the ex-.400-hitter grouched that he had batting-practice pitchers in his entourage with more stuff than the exasperating Cuban could offer. Marrero is reported to have responded—when appraised of Hornsby's savage put-down—with typical playful calm: "Thees is good, maybe they should peetch in a game."

A slightly less endearing (if equally enduring) legend has the reputed linguistically challenged Washington hurler snubbing a guileless fan who had offered a cheap cigar in exchange for the hurler's autograph. "Me sorry," the pint-sized moundsman reportedly complained, "but it take two thees kind ceegar for me to sign one time."

And of course there are the endless Ted Williams stories. A favorite involves an account of the first time the undaunted Marrero faced the legendary Boston slugger. The face-off supposedly came during a 1950 spring training game (Marrero's big league rookie campaign, a few months shy of age thirty-nine) and is recounted frequently and with glamorous embellishment to underscore the unflappable nature of the ancient rookie. Entering from the bullpen with the bases loaded and Williams wagging his lumber menacingly in the batter's box, the Cuban—at least as the legend now has it—called Nats receiver Al Evans to the hill, apparently intent on imparting some sign of his own over-brimming confidence. Assured by the befuddled backstop that this was indeed the great Williams about to take his cuts, Marrero pressed for still further reassurance on the point: "Eef eet eesn't him, I no geev him my best peetch." Instructed by his nervous catcher to deliver nothing but outside fastballs, the confident Cuban reportedly heaved only tantalizing curves and struck out Williams on four pitches. But Marrero himself only looked puzzled and amused when this author recounted the famous tale to him in our first face-to-face meeting in Havana during the early winter of 1999.

With the flesh-and-blood Marrero on the big-league scene, Roy Hobbs (famed protagonist of Bernard Malamud's 1952 novel *The Natural*) was thus certainly not the only improbable thirty-nine-year-old rookie sporting a mystery-wrapped past when he first arrived out of nowhere to tackle the big league wars. The difference between Bernard Malamud's popular fictional account of improbable stardom and Marrero's own baseball reality, of course, was that the cigar-chomping Cuban never worked any late-season pennant miracles fit for a Hollywood script.

Marrero did contribute mightily, alongside fellow Cubans Sandalio Consuegra and Julio Moreno, to a few memorable springtime runs at American League respectability—one in 1952 that even had owner Griffith's usually tame Senators contending inside the first division at the midsummer All-Star break. But late-season dips always left manager Bucky Harris and crew within a stone's throw of the league basement by early September; and during Marrero's tenure the club finished fifth three times, sixth once, and seventh once. And the



Macmillan *Baseball Encyclopedia* entry next to the name of Conrado Marrero hardly suggests pure brilliance of talent, though the fine print does reveal a few marvels that might escape casual notice. These include three winning campaigns with a team that was twenty-eight games under the break-even point during that same stretch, one sub-3.00 ERA (among the league's top ten that particular year), and a consistently stingy walks-to-innings-pitched ratio (one walk every 2.95 innings across his full big league career).

It is the stories surrounding Marrero's clubhouse antics—not numerical pitching lines—that have often reached legendary proportions. One Ted Williams tale featuring a Marrero autograph request is perhaps the most memorable, even if it is likely the most apocryphal. It is a story Marrero himself loves to tell, though he usually admits that it never happened quite as reported. Supposedly Marrero approached Williams before a game and requested the slugger's signature on a ball with which he had earlier fanned the Splendid Splinter. Williams grudgingly signed—the legend continues—but that same afternoon crushed a Marrero curve into the far reaches of the right field grandstand. As he rounded third base Williams reportedly glanced toward the mound and shouted out a biting reminder to the diminutive Washington hurler: "Why don't you see if you can find that one and I'll sign IT for you too!"

But the lasting image for most fans was one capsulated in a series of 1951 and 1952 magazine photos placed alongside accompanying stories that played up the paunchy Washington right-hander as a kind of carefree Cuban goodwill ambassador to the thriving "Golden Fifties" era big league scene. Most of the photos involve a rotund Marrero sandwiched between teammates Consuegra, Moreno, and Campos and enjoying some old-fashioned big league horseplay. A few illustrate an unorthodox pitching delivery which one scribe of the period portrayed fittingly as resembling "an orangutan heaving a 16-pound shot put" and which *El Curvedador* himself often characterized as an unsettling delivery in which he threw everything at the plate but his ever-present Havana stogie. Marrero's right-handed delivery began with his left foot "stuck in the bucket"—slanted toward first base—and often featured a drawn-out cranking double or triple windmill windup (a la Satchel Paige) which on one occasion had Philadelphia Athletics' infielder Eddie Joost so steamed that he literally jumped up and down in the hitter's rectangle while screaming obscenities at his taunting mound opponent.

Yet for engaging personality and even for mound effectiveness, the pint-sized Marrero stood tall above the rest of the *Cubanolas* who took up temporary residence with Bucky Harris and Clark Griffith in Washington. Pascual and Ramos would earn most of their substantial credentials away from the nation's capital, the former as staff ace of the Killebrew-led Twins resurrected by Clark Griffith's adopted son (Calvin Griffith) out in Minnesota, the latter as a briefly effective late-season Yankee bullpen replacement during the New York pennant dash of September 1964. Marrero was also a quality big league pitcher saddled—just like Pascual and Ramos—with a hopeless contingent of losers for teammates and also with his best years already trailing far behind him. His reputation was solid as a dependable starter who rarely defeated himself, and his mound feats (which included an April 26, 1951, one-hitter against Philadelphia, spoiled only by a Barney McCosky' fourth inning round-tripper) were often truly remarkable for a journeyman hurler of his advanced age.

But there is quite a bit more to the story. The Conrado Marrero known to American League fans in the inaugural seasons of the century's middle decade was only one slim chapter in a rather remarkable baseball life of six decades duration. For countless Cuban fans (and certainly for Marrero himself) the big league stopover was only icing on an already substantial cake. Connie Marrero had long been a legend in his homeland before he ever showed up in *Las Grandes Ligas*. And his seemingly endless baseball sojourn would turn perhaps even more remarkable once he returned to his native island

BEAR



just a handful of years before Fidel Castro's revolution sent Cuban baseball hurtling toward the dark side of the moon.

While Marrero may have seemed a long-lost relic to stateside fans, he has been anything but a useless icon from a past era back on his own native island. Ensnared for the past four decades in "revolutionary" Cuban society, with its new brand of amateur baseball, the ex-big leaguer has remained a fixture of the game still played with undying passion on the home front. He had started late in life as both an amateur and professional ballplayer; he only reluctantly signed a pro contract after he was suspended from amateur competitions in the mid-forties for playing on two different teams (strictly against the rules of the time); then he hung around as a professional player and coach for almost as long as Satchel Paige. As the millennium approached and then passed, and as he faces his tenth decade on the planet, he is still hanging around, only recently (before his eyesight finally failed in 2008) coaching youngsters who were often seventy years his juniors.

Marrero's recent work has involved training some of the island's best young apprentice moundsmen. He served on a part-time basis with the Cuban League team representing Granma Province as late as the early 2000s. His most recent trainee of note is Ciro Silvino Licea, a raw talent who sprang on the international scene in November 1999 when he mowed down Team USA batters for nine impressive innings in the semifinals of Intercontinental Cup play in Australia. The truly ancient part-time coach once explained his contribution as an easy form of labor for a ninety-year-old. "I never run, just chat a little, grab a baseball sometimes, even sometimes throw a toss or two. I tell them that you do it this way or that way. And I tell them about the psychological things. An arm is important, but you have to have a good head to be a pitcher." If anyone can conjure up comparisons of today's Cuban baseball with that of past epochs, it would have to be Conrado Marrero.

As early as the late thirties—seven long decades ago, during the heyday of Lou Gehrig, a fading Babe Ruth, and a young Joe DiMaggio—Marrero was already making his lasting mark within Cuban amateur circles. He was a surprisingly late starter, even in the amateur ranks back home, signing on with the league team from Cienfuegos only after he had already turned twenty-seven and had been running his father's farm and toiling on Sundays with a local sandlot club called *Los Piratas* for nearly a full decade. And he recounts that he became a pitcher in the first place only because of an early unpleasant taste of the hazards of defensive play. A bad-hop grounder had once blackened his eye while playing third base for a local village team and quickly turned his preferences toward a seemingly safer perch on the pitcher's mound.

Marrero himself explained his late arrival in the baseball spotlight during a mid-1990s interview with Cuban baseball historian Roberto González Echevarría (*The Pride of Havana*, pp. 234-237).³ Ball playing for Marrero began during teenage years on his father's *El Labertino* farm, a tiny sugar cane plantation located in Las Villas Province. Farmhands toiled six days a week and only enjoyed ballgames as a rare form of much-needed Sunday afternoon recreation. Marrero would eventually earn a substantial reputation on the mound during these local contests by repeatedly besting amateur nines from neighboring villages. Eventually graduating to the local Sagua de Grande semi-pro *Casino Español* ball club, the talented cane harvester turned heads with a victory over the Cienfuegos-based *Casa Stany* club (sponsored by a popular men's clothing store) in the port village of La Isabela. The latter outfit was about to join the Union Atlética de Cuba island-wide amateur circuit and wasted little time recruiting their unheralded nemesis who was already a seasoned veteran of twenty-seven. Marrero credited those early successes in local sandlot contests to his mastery of a tight-breaking curve that was in reality a nasty slider.



Pitching never dulled his interest in swinging the bat though. One of the most colorful tales about Marrero involves his hitting exploits in the Cuban League during the mid-fifties, where he once jumped into the wrong batter's box and still somehow laced out a crucial base hit. The story has it that with a runner on third, Marrero swaggered to the plate and shockingly decided on the spur of the moment to try his skill and luck from the left side of the dish. It was a moment that reportedly left manager Mike Guerra nearly catatonic in the *Almendares* dugout. Before his manager could react, however, Marrero somehow dumped a lucky run-producing blooper over the stunned opposition infield, saving the day and perhaps even his own skin.

Connie Marrero's greatest moments were those played on the amateur diamonds of WWII-era Cuba, and the most luminous hours came with a pair of celebrated international contests in the early forties. Marrero's personal career apex arguably arrived with the IBAF world championships of those wartime seasons. First there was the tense championship matchup with Team Venezuela in Havana's *La Tropical* Stadium on October 23, 1941. The diminutive Cuban right-hander squared off against Daniel "Chino" (Chinaman) Canónico in a classic duel that fell ultimately to the visitors 3-1 on three first-inning tallies. (Two walks by the usually control-happy Marrero fueled the rally.) But the Cuban ace would gain his sweet revenge and his country's grateful adulation a mere year later (October 4, 1942) when he returned to the hill to face a Venezuelan lineup sporting Luis Aparicio (father of the Cooperstown-inducted shortstop) at second base and the same tantalizing Canónico on the hill. This time around the masterful Marrero spun a memorable three-hitter of his own in the 8-0 victory which touched off wild island-wide celebrations.

The pro career of Cuba's most famous ball-playing *guajiro* (peasant) stretched both long before and long after his brief stay with the big-league Senators. There were some remarkable years spent with the Havana Cubans, the island's first team in organized baseball. Thoroughly dominating minor league swingers with his assortment of wicked sliders, bouncing knucklers, and bending curves, the league's oldest player racked up three straight twenty-win campaigns (also tossing a masterful no-hitter) and some ERAs that were so microscopic they stretch credulity, even for that basement level of pro ball. It was the veteran Cuban's ticket straight to the big time, where he debuted with six victories as a long-toothed rookie in 1950 and then celebrated the spring of his fortieth year (1951) by reeling off five straight cold-weather wins (the feat that earned him a full-blown spread in *Life* magazine) and checking in at 11-5 by mid-August before wilting in the late summer heat. The eleven victories were tops on that year's anemic Washington staff and he was also 11-7 that same winter with the *Almendares Alacranes* of the wintertime Cuban League. His Cuban League career (where he struck out 478 and only walked 295 during a decade of service) didn't wind down until 1955 (age forty-four) and two summers later he was still throwing an occasionally effective inning or two for the Havana-based Class AAA Cuban Sugar Kings.

Marrero was still a popular dugout and bullpen fixture throughout the mid-fifties with Havana's International League franchise. Cuba's Sugar Kings were a team that represented the last hurrah of Cuban professional baseball in the years immediately preceding the Castro-led Cuban Revolution. The Sugar Kings (a top Cincinnati Reds affiliate from 1954-1960) would over a half-dozen seasons boast such local fixtures and future big leaguers as Orlando Peña, Mike Cuéllar, Leo Cárdenas, Juan Delís, Fermín Guerra, Ray Noble, Carlos Paula, and Octavio "Cookie" Rojas, as well as such notable imports as Owen Friend, Lou Skizas, Brooks Lawrence, Jim Pendleton, Luis Arroyo (Puerto Rico), and Pompeyo Davalillo (Venezuela). Here Marrero's role was much more muted. The aging right-hander posted a 7-3 record for the International League outfit in 1955 and was also 3-1 in spot duty for the 1956 Havana-based AAA club. Not much of a record at first glance perhaps, until it is pointed out that the veteran junk-baller

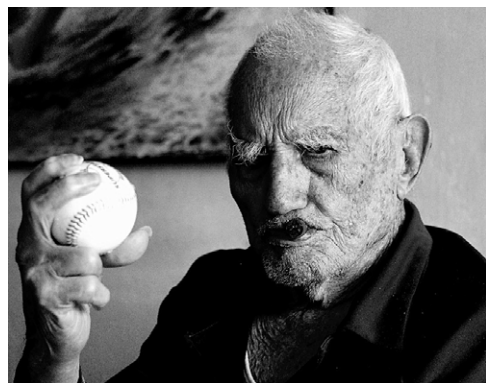


was nearly five years older at the time than the club's veteran skipper, Reggie Otero, whose own brief big-league playing career had opened and closed with the Chicago Cubs a full ten years earlier.

All told, Marrero pitched hundreds of games in dozens of leagues before he finally hung up his well-traveled glove on the eve of Fidel Castro's rise to political power. A career that began almost accidentally with Cienfuegos in the Cuban Amateur Athletic Union league at the ripe age of twenty-seven was nonetheless still durable enough—despite such a delayed start—to stretch for a full two decades. He would be the only pitcher to toss a pair of no-hitters in Cuban AAU Amateur League history, and in his first three pro seasons (in the Florida International circuit) his control was so outstanding that he struck out 586 while walking only 117. He became the first Cuban ever to defeat the USA in world amateur play (during the 1939 IBAF world championships staged in Havana). He was also a big leaguer who in his twilight years still contends that his fondest moments and greatest achievements came with his first team in Cienfuegos as a rank amateur. Not bad for a hydrant-shaped junk-baller whom Bob Feller once described as “something you'd expect to find under a sombrero.”

The showdown between the American League's Baltimore Orioles and Cuba's national team—staged in Havana's *Estadio Latinoamericano* in March 1999—was truly a moment for the ages. Events surrounding the historic first visit in four decades of a Major League Baseball team to the island of Cuba left a number of indelible images. One was the teeming Havana ballpark crammed with wildly enthusiastic flag-waving Cuban fans. Another was Fidel Castro himself seated alongside a somber Bud Selig and seemingly moribund Peter Angelos. (“Hear no evil, see no evil, do no evil!”) A return match in Baltimore a month later would encapsulate—with a single wire service front-page photograph of Cuban Andy Morales dancing joyfully around the base paths—two far different baseball worlds: one of seeming sandlot innocence and the other of sour professional arrogance.

But there was no moment attached to the long-anticipated and politically charged contest that was more poignant than the one which witnessed a still-fit eighty-eight-year-old ex-big league midget poised on the pitching rubber in Havana's March sunshine, determined to bridge the existing gulf of four decades of uneasy separation between two baseball-loving nations. Conrado Marrero took the mound for a celebratory game-opening ceremonial “pitch” and was not about to quickly release his moment of relived glory. Once handed the ball and back on familiar ground, Cuba's most famous living hurler was determined to make his presence felt and test an arm that had not seen serious action since the days when Fidel was still a budding young revolutionary and Washington and Havana were still hardball cronies.



A still-spry Marrero was determined to toss a pitch or two to big leaguer Brady Anderson, who apparently never quite grasped the tenor of the moment. The scene offered every bit the drama of the landmark game that was about to follow. Marrero lobbed three *eephus* balls plate ward, each one a bit straighter and truer than the last. When it became clear that the old-timer would not

relinquish the hill without a bullpen call, Cuban home plate umpire Nelson Díaz motioned Anderson into the box for one final serious toss. It was pure theater—the stuff baseball used to be made of.

Notes



An earlier and slightly different version of this biography appeared under the title "The Baseball Half-Century of Conrado Marrero" (Chapter IV) in my own volume: *A History of Cuban Baseball, 1864-2006* (McFarland Publishers, 2006).

The author is indebted to Rod Nelson, who offered several valuable suggestions during his peer review of this essay.

[1] The fire-plug description seems merited by the short stature, rounded shoulders, and stocky frame of the athlete visible in numerous photographs surviving from his Washington and Havana playing days. While big-league encyclopedias list Marrero's size as 5'5", 158 lbs, Cuban biographer Severo Nieto records 5'7", 165 pounds. Whatever the exact numbers, the hurler was universally described as "short" but never "lean" and more than one observer describes him in uniform as looking like "someone imitating a baseball player" (González Echevarría, p. 234).

[2] Details concerning the "myths" surrounding Fidel Castro's apocryphal ball-playing career (and false reports of Cambria and other pro clubs scouting the future Cuban president) are detailed in Chapter 9 ("The Myth of Fidel Castro, Barbudos Ballplayer") of *A History of Cuban Baseball, 1864-2006*.

[3] Marrero has usually kept his personal and family life something of a guarded secret, even during December 1999 and February 2001 interviews with this author. On those latter occasions he preferred to remain strictly on topic regarding his legendary baseball career. The single book-length treatment of Marrero's saga published in Cuba (by Severo Nieto) is strictly a baseball-related portrait that reveals no relevant family details. Through the recent efforts of Vancouver SABR member Kit Krieger--a longtime family friend--and the valuable cooperation of Rogelio Marrero--the pitcher's grandson--the following family details are now available. Conrado Marrero's parents, Leopoldo (Polo) Marrero Mederos and Gumersinda (Gume) Ramos Mederos were natives of Sagua La Grande and raised eight children, of whom Conrado was the fourth oldest. Other siblings included brothers Benito, Eugenio, Mario and Ramiro, and sisters Fidelia, Florentina, and Olimpia. Connie's birth is now known to have occurred at 10 a.m. on the morning of April 25, 1911, in the Chinchila neighborhood of Sanga La Grande. Conrado left formal schooling at the age of 12 in order to work on his father's sugar mill plantation, taking over responsibilities for driving ox-drawn carts that transported raw cane from the fields to the processing mills. Connie was married on May 27, 1937 to Petra Emila Calero Hernández--he was 25 at the time and she was 19--and the couple produced four children: an infant who died in childbirth followed by sons Rogelio (father of grandson Rogelio Jr.), Orestes and Francisco. Connie also fathered a fourth son named Ivan Marrero out of wedlock. Three of Marrero's sons (Orestes, Francisco and Ivan) have relocated to the United States (the first two to Miami and the latter to New Jersey) and are reportedly all still living. Grandson Rogelio reports maintaining sporadic communications with Orestes (Kiche) and Ivan, but has lost all contact with his third uncle Francisco (Paco). The elderly former pitcher is known to have visited his two sons in Miami on at least one occasion in the 1990s. It is also noteworthy that a widely circulated reported claiming that recent major league catcher Eli Marrero (born in Havana on November 17, 1973) was related to Conrado Marrero apparently has no basis in fact.

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