

A History of Cuban
Baseball, 1864–2006

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For Mark Rucker, who shared the adventure,
and for Ronnie Wilbur, who shares the dream.

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A History of the Latin American Game* (1994)

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*On the cover: (top) Alejandro Oms; Fidel Castro with fellow revolutionaries;
(bottom) Cuba's 2003 World Cup championship team*

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Preface

In the most elaborate previous history of Cuban baseball, Roberto González Echevarría advances his thesis that the island's national pastime reached its zenith at the tail end of the 1946–47 professional winter league season. Readers of *The Pride of Havana* are led to believe that after the pennant-deciding clashes between Almendares and Habana in February 1947 Cuban baseball suffered a long and steady decline toward oblivion. First came a decade of rapid disintegration for the once popular professional league affiliated with Major League Baseball; next followed the half-century (Echevarría was writing in 1999) of virtual isolation which transpired while a post-revolution amateur league system blocked top Cuban stars like Agustín Marquetti, Antonio Muñoz, Braudilio Vinent and Omar Linares from their destined true Valhalla in the American big leagues; during the same wasteland half-century (from González Echevarría's perspective and that of not an insignificant number of other professional-baseball-oriented authors) Cuba's often over-rated national teams won endless international titles only because they competed against inferior talent culled from the sport's amateur backwaters.

Professor González Echevarría is an enthusiastic fan of Cuba's early professional heyday and an informed student of baseball's earliest roots and evolution on the now communist-controlled island that today houses perhaps the most vibrant baseball universe found outside the American major leagues. But like so many enthusiastic fans of the diamond sport, the author of *The Pride of Havana* also falls into the trap of assuming that his sport's Golden Age settled in the fondly remembered and nostalgia-colored seasons of his own youth — the age when all things (baseball included) were seen with a much rosier hue. Nothing in the world is more conservative than a middle-aged male baseball rooter. And there is no more distorted form of history than one tinged with heavy layers of youth-inspired nostalgia.

Cuban baseball does not — despite the contentions of many of its recent chroniclers — live entirely or even primarily in a realm of backward-looking nostalgia; nor does the island's national pastime depend on deep-rooted memories to recover its greatest seasons, most glorious triumphs, or most celebrated individual ball-playing heroes. The reality — demonstrated on the diamonds of Hiram Bithorn Stadium in San Juan and Petco Park in San Diego — is that the apex mo-

ments of Cuban baseball history have only of late been unfolding with the still-fresh events of March 2006. The focal point of Cuba's baseball nostalgia will now for the long foreseeable future assuredly lie in the early months of the sixth year of the twenty-first century. The Golden Age is not at all a distant fading memory to be sought out in some remote lost era, but rather a firsthand experience to be savored in the living present. Never has Cuban baseball been any better than it is at the present moment; never has the talent been deeper, the game more celebrated, or the triumphs more pronounced.

Professor González Echevarría's portrait of Cuban baseball, though one informed by many valuable details and much painstaking research into the game's earlier epochs, thus in the end leaves us with a major distortion of the island's true sporting saga. The game's zenith on the island is not centered in the middle of the past century but lies instead in the opening decade of the new one. But the triumphs of the Cuban national team in the recent WBC were also not an overnight aberration. They are best viewed as the final chapter of a steady four-plus-decade evolution of modern-era Cuban baseball that represents the island sport's true Age of Valhalla. Nearly twelve million devoted native fans have thrilled to more than forty seasons of a competitive island-wide league that has produced the game's greatest legacy and provided the bulk of its greatest stars. Sluggers Marquetti, Muñoz, Wilfredo Sánchez and Luis Casanova can match any heroes of the early twentieth century blackball era; Cuba has never produced a better all-around player than Omar Linares or a purer natural hitter than Osmani Urrutia; the recent heroics of Liván and El Duque Hernández and of José Contreras seem to seal the issue that Cuban pitchers in the big leagues have never been better than they are in the present era (and this despite the fact that the best Cuban pitchers like Pedro Lazo, Lázaro Valle and Norge Vera have never left their homeland).

The true tragedy for American fans is not the one universally assumed — that cold war politics has prevented Cuban stars from flooding into the major leagues. The true loss is that the prized league in Cuba — as much on a par with the majors as either the Japanese Central League or Japanese Pacific League — has remained as hidden from North American eyes as once the Negro circuits of the early twentieth century were also similarly obscured from view. The last half-century of

baseball in Cuba has not in any sense been the lamentable decline reported ad nauseam by Cuban ex-patriots in Miami or by ill-informed champions of major league baseball; it has instead been an era of steadily building momentum that has now resulted in the Cuban national pastime finally reaching its destined appointment with long-overdue recognition during the eye-opening events of March 2006.

Much of Havana (then a city of little more than a million inhabitants) may well have paused for the 1947 Almendares versus Habana showdown pennant series as described by González Echevarría. In contrast, an entire island nation of more than 12 million — citizens from all walks and not merely baseball fans — was totally paralyzed by the dozen days of the recent World Baseball Classic. This is neither an exaggeration nor an aberration. When the Cuban team played in San Juan and San Diego all commerce on the island literally ground to a halt. Perhaps as much as ninety percent of the country — a nation well accustomed to pausing for public spectacles — was glued before television sets and radios to follow every pitch with mixtures of joy and agony. This was no longer the fair-weather fans of local professional clubs like the post-war Blues or Lions, but followers of a team carrying an entire nation's self-esteem. This was professional baseball's closest-ever approximation of the twentieth-century phenomenon of world cup soccer.

Not only the baseball-oriented male population (as back in 1947) was now engrossed by the spectacle, but also a more universal audience that included women and children and even the occasional male who was not normally a follower of sporting events. It was patriotism and ethnic pride that was now on the line. A land where baseball has a lengthy history as a proving ground for nationhood and a symbol for patriotism now discovered its fondest dream on the distant baseball diamonds of the north. It was the dream that their own all-stars could indeed compete head-to-toe with the world's top professionals. There was now full justification in the offering that a league long enjoyed at home was far more than only a precious domestic entertainment. Cubans now relished the fact that their beloved home-grown brand of "pelota" was indeed equal to any version found in the outside world.

Two myths, both fostered by most of the earlier treatments of island baseball, were laid aside by the recent MLB-sponsored World Baseball Classic. One was the notion that Cuba's Olympic triumphs in Barcelona, Atlanta and Athens were in the end false measures of the transparent powerhouse teams that represented Cuba's national pastime. A second was the idea that the denizens of the past-era Havana professional circuit of the 1940s or 1950s represented a higher level of play on the island. The reality of course is that the native Cuban pros of the immediate post-war era were in the main minor leaguers, sprinkled with a few marginal big league all-stars (Miñoso, Pascual, Pedro Ramos) who made preciously little impact on diamonds up north. One simply can not imagine a representative squad of top Cubans — say one with Camilo Pascual on the hill, Julio Bécquer at first, Willie Miranda at short and Miñoso batting cleanup — beating true big league

all-stars whose lineup might include Mantle, Mays, Aaron, Clemente, Snider and Berra. Yet the WBC found today's Cuba all-stars triumphing over the likes of Pujols, Bernie Williams, David Ortiz, Omar Vizquel and a pair of Cy Young starters named Colón and Santana. The WBC sufficiently showcased that the Cuban Leaguers are indeed big leaguers capable of holding their own with the best squads assembled from the majors. The recent tournament also suggests that books like *The Pride of Havana* which have downplayed the modern-era Cuban League have in the process largely distorted the historical record. This current volume has been written with the primary goal of finally setting that record straight.

* * *

Major League Baseball's first World Baseball Classic did not turn out to be quite what either the moguls of American professional baseball or any of the rest of the world had quite expected. MLB's WBC was advertised from the start as the first legitimate global championship tournament in which top stars from the world's self-anointed best professional league would battle for patriotic pride while wearing the uniforms of their native countries. After nearly three weeks of exciting action that had gripped television audiences throughout Latin America and Asia, as well as much of North America, we arrived at a most surprising if altogether intriguing grand finale in San Diego's showcase Petco Park. Japan (without any of its recognizable big league exports except Mariners nonpareil Ichiro Suzuki and Rangers closer Akinori Otsuka) and Cuba (the only team in the tournament with no pro leaguers in its stable) together proved to the world that their brand of team-oriented baseball is the style best adapted to winning in short-duration and tension-packed international tournaments.

Before the first pitch of the Cuba-Japan showdown was hurled on March 20, big league superstars filling the showcase lineups of teams representing pre-tournament favorites Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and the USA had already all rejoined their pro clubs at spring training sites scattered throughout Florida and Arizona. When all-stars representing baseball's two other top leagues — the Cuban League and the Japanese Professional League — assumed the field for the final nine innings of the WBC there was no Derek Jeter, Albert Pujols, Pudge Rodríguez, Johann Santana, Bartolo Colón or Carlos Beltrán anywhere on the scene. With the single exception of Japan's Ichiro Suzuki, the only true star remaining here at San Diego's Petco Park was the white five-pointer that adorns the Cuban flag. It was not the scenario originally envisioned by Commissioner Bud Selig, Players' Union head Gene Orza or other architects of MLB's effort at remaking Olympic baseball in its own image. But few could deny that it was a grand enough spectacle for all its uncountable turns and twists.

For MLB executives the final weekend of this showcase tournament, in fact, had to be the worst possible nightmare. Japan's Central and Pacific leagues, while a valued source for a few select star imports like Ichiro, Hideki Matsui, and Hideo Nomo, have never been judged on a par with the U.S. majors.

And the Cubans have always been discounted by North American baseball forces as highly overrated for all their past international successes. Cuba has dominated the international baseball scene since its 1959 socialist revolution and new form of amateur sport reshaped the island. Cuban teams have captured three of four Olympic crowns, 25 of 28 World Cups, and nine of 12 Intercontinental Cup titles. The only time they have not won a World Cup title since 1976 was in 1982, a year when they did not compete. But such a record of unchallenged supremacy has long been dispatched as ill-won and even illegitimate.

In truth, the very motivation for the WBC in the first place had in large part been to put the Cubans back in their rightful place by stacking international baseball with the cream of the professional talent pool. The consensus reaction state-side has always been that Cuba's reputation was overblown, that their miraculous string of successes was earned in cheap fashion against amateur or collegiate level opponents. The prevailing wisdom was that the Cuban Leaguers could never compete head-to-head against top big leaguers. Just how wrong that perception had always been was soon underscored with a string of convincing victories over Venezuela (featuring Cy Young starter Johann Santana), Puerto Rico (playing on home turf before a packed arena of 20,000 fanatics), and universal favorite Team Dominicana (also boasting its Cy Young starter Bartolo Colón). Never again should the strength and resilience of Cuban baseball be so callously doubted.

Of course MLB was not entirely a loser — despite such an unpredictable turn of events on the field of play. The stated WBC goal of spreading a message that baseball is truly an international sport was by all measures a resounding success. Merchandise was peddled in record numbers. Stadiums were jam packed in Orlando and San Juan and also cozily populated in the larger venues of Phoenix and Anaheim. All-important television ratings far exceeded expectations, despite the underwhelming underperformance of a star-studded Team USA. The atmosphere was truly electric for second round matches in San Juan's Hiram Bithorn Stadium — where four Latin American powers faced off in a first true "Caribbean Series" matching the Cuban juggernaut against top big leaguers from Venezuela, the Dominican and host Puerto Rico. And most importantly, a huge North American television audience had its eyes rudely opened to the undeniable fact that top flight baseball is no longer restricted to the United States and the Dominican Republic. Mexico and Canada both upended the USA Dream Team. Korea, without a single household name big leaguer, ran the table undefeated until a semifinal loss to rival Japan. And the two international powerhouses left standing on the final night claimed only a single recognizable major leaguer between them. What could possibly have been a better scenario for growing baseball as a mature international sport?

The biggest shock in an event full of more than mild surprises was without doubt the wild successes of the Cuban national team. Cuban baseball has long awaited the hour when it would find a main stage to demonstrate that its quality was on a true par with that of any league in the world — especially

the celebrity-stunted, high-salaried forces of the U.S. major leagues. That hour finally arrived and the new-generation Cuban Leaguers were more than up to the challenge. There will now, of course, be skeptics quick to assert that the WBC was an unfair test simply because big leaguers were in the early stages of spring training, with pitchers not yet fine-tuned and batters struggling with timing and lacking mid-season conditioning. But Dominican manager Manny Acta was quick to dismiss this perception. "Everyone knew we were going to play this tournament as far back as the last All-Star break. Everyone therefore had the same opportunity to prepare themselves." It must be remembered that if the Cubans were coming into this tournament in the middle of their own National Series, they were also at a severe disadvantage because of pitch-count limits established to load the dice in favor of the less-conditioned big leaguers.

Cuba's victories in the WBC have not been quite as surprising to those of us who have closely watched the Cuban National Series on island soil over the years, or followed the triumphs of the Cuban team for two decades in distant outposts such as Barcelona, Sydney, Atlanta, Athens, Rotterdam and Taipei. The Cubans have long-since mastered the art of playing in short tournaments with a single-elimination championship round format. The Cuban brain trust, including manager Higinio Vélez, commissioner Carlitos Rodríguez and technical director Benito Camacho, did a remarkable job in selecting the best possible roster from numerous top National Series stars, and then in preparing their ball club physically and psychologically for the stiffest challenge in their nation's century-plus sports history. The results were the biggest string of victories in the proud history of Cuban baseball — either before or after the 1959 revolution. Despite a one-sided meltdown loss to Japan in the finale, Cuba had already savored on U.S. soil the true apex of its gold-studded 140-year-long baseball saga.

The North American press — partly from shameful lack of information and partly from its ongoing fascination and even obsession with the storyline of possible defections by star Cuban players — once again wrote endlessly before the first pitch of the WBC that either Cuba would not send its top stars to compete in San Juan and San Diego, or that showcase players would likely abandon their homeland in droves. Such stories were, as always, the result of wishful thinking and unfortunate disinformation. They failed to take into account the seriousness with which Cuba's baseball brain trust would prepare for this showcase tournament. They relied on speculations that Cuba's baseball forces were now weakened by retirements and defections. They discounted pitchers like Pedro Lazo and Yadel Martí and sluggers like Yulieski Gourriel, who *Baseball America* would soon enough be touting as the top overall WBC prospect.

What most of American and international media failed to recognize on the eve of the WBC was that new stars had already emerged at Athens (2004 Olympics) and last fall in Rotterdam's World Cup. Pedro Luis Lazo is every bit as devastating on the mound as José Contreras. Yadel Martí and

Vicyohandri Odelfn may already be, despite their young ages, superior to any of the handful of Cuban hurlers who have abandoned the island. Ariel Pestano is a big-league quality catcher and switch-hitting Frederich Cepeda a sure-fire big league outfielder. In Osmani Urrutia and Michel Enríquez the current squad boasts two of the top five hitters (career batting average) in Cuban League history. And at 22, Yulieski Gourriel is already drawing comparisons with the legendary Omar Linares, comparisons that have now been rubber-stamped by two weeks of WBC action. American media has continued to ignore the fact that despite the departures of El Duque and Contreras, the large majority of the island's top stars have remained safely planted at home, awaiting the opportunity to test themselves against big leaguers while wearing the jersey of their homeland and not the uniforms of commercial big league ball clubs.

This was indeed the strongest Cuban lineup in recent memory and arguably the best ever. If there was a flaw it might have been pitching depth, yet that chink in otherwise solid armor proved to be minimal at best since Cuba won in the end on the strength of clutch pitching. The offensive lineup Cuba brought to San Juan was filled with productive batsmen named Garlobo, Cepeda, Gourriel and Urrutia (now the Cuban League's all-time leader in batting average), all equal to any sluggers of the past. And in the end the Cubans won big games over their three Caribbean rivals on the strength of their underestimated but always clutch hurling. Contreras might be gone. But Lazo was still there and proved himself the one truly dominant closer on the WBC scene. With young arms like Martí, Odelfn and Yunieski Maya, the Cuban talent well is now anything but dry.

The first WBC was not only a resounding success by every measure, but it was also — in a way MLB officials had not anticipated — a turning point for international baseball. In the end there would be no anticipated marquee match-up of big league superstars representing baseball's two strongest bastions — the USA and the Dominican Republic. There was, instead, a far more intriguing clash between the two best leagues outside the majors — the Cuban League and the Japanese League. MLB had unwittingly managed to shine the spotlight directly on its two main competitors.

When the dust (and in San Diego the raindrops) finally cleared, the debut WBC had proven at least three things. One was that Cuban baseball is absolutely for real. The Cubans have not won so relentlessly because they only face collegians or pros of lower classification. Cuban talent has now proven quite capable of rising to the level of whatever challenge it faces. A second eye-opener in this tournament had to be the quality of pitching now found around the world. Dominican manager Acta stressed that perception after his team's semifinal loss to Cuba. A final lesson of this tournament has been that Team USA can not expect to win on the world stage simply by throwing together a team of super celebrities at the eleventh hour. The American big leaguers need to learn about playing with the same intensified patriotic passion long found in the camps of the Dominicans, Japanese, Koreans and Cubans.

The first WBC will leave an indelible impression on the baseball world until the next round is played sometime in 2009. As others have observed in the aftermath, a legitimate question has now been raised about MLB's centerpiece position in the baseball universe: perhaps the big leagues no longer possess the highest quality baseball in the world, only the most expensive. Cuban skipper Higinio Vélez — who managed his pitchers throughout the tournament with the consummate skills of a big league bench boss — uttered the most memorable line of the final weekend in San Diego when he pointed out that his Cubans were a team of “hombres not nombres” (“men not names”). Vélez was quick to clarify that he was claiming that his team had great and dedicated ballplayers even if they were still “unknowns” on the world professional stage.

One of those “unknowns” was slugging outfielder Frederich Cepeda — the only ballplayer to hit safely in all eight WBC games — who best captured the theme of Cuba's stunning successes when he reminded the American press that “you can not judge baseball teams by the prices the athletes are paid, but only by the heart with which they play.” Cepeda concluded that “our team has always fought with unity and control, as a team of unity.” That unity has now sent shockwaves throughout the baseball universe.

Where has the Cuban baseball come from that shocked fans in American and Asian venues during March 2006? What indeed has been going on in Cuba during the nearly half-century of so-called “amateur” league play that followed Cuba's 1959 political upheaval? And what are the links between this post-revolutionary diamond heritage and the three-quarters of a century of professional action that had preceded and that fills most of the volumes previously devoted to the island's rich baseball saga? The answers are all here in this first extensive study of Cuba's baseball heritage that gives equal weight to ballpark history both before and after the fateful social and political transformations of January 1959, and both before and after the arrival in power of Cuba's most notable baseball fan, Fidel Castro.

* * *

Cuba's baseball history — like the 20th-century social and political history of the island as a whole — thus falls into two equally remarkable chapters, seemingly quite separate and defined by a wide chasm standing squarely between the two, a deep gulf resulting from the island nation's irrevocable break with its neighboring American overlords which came near the end of the century's sixth decade. But these two chapters are not nearly as divorced, one from the other, as a first superficial survey might seemingly dictate. The amateur baseball tradition which has been fostered under the Cuban socialist/communist government since 1962 finds its roots deeply embedded in a native Cuban amateur ball-playing tradition which reaches back to the thirties and even decades before that. At the same time, the aura of myth and mystery endemic to Cuban professional baseball of the blackball era and of the winter league heyday has never quite left the scene, even once the bats became aluminum, the championship prizes were re-



Manager Higinio Vélez is at the center of the home plate greeting party as Yulieski Gourriel completes a home run trot against Panama that launched Cuba's run to the World Baseball Classic finals.

duced to world cup trophies and Olympic gold medals, and the ballpark action became a showcase piece of the larger program of politicized and socialized government-run sports.

If Fidel Castro has often used baseball in recent decades as a propaganda tool to advance the cause of national identity and promote his perceived advantages of a socialist society, it must be remembered that the sport's 19th-century roots were also bound up with a nationalistic cause of rebellion against the then-hated Spaniards. If the island has taken pride of late in thrashing U.S. professionals at Olympic tournaments, the same was the case during barnstorming trips into Cuba by brash major leaguers nearly a century ago, when the burdens of American occupation and U.S. imperialism seemed every bit as threatening to Cubans as they later would under Batista and in the shadows of the Bay of Pigs. And if the Cuban national team has won many glorious victories in international amateur competitions over the last three decades, it was also regularly doing so almost before Fidel Castro was even born.

The chapters and appendices that follow tell of the rich history of Cuban baseball since its origins in the mid-19th-century. This is a subject that has not gone untreated in the

recent literature. Celebrated Yale University literature professor Roberto González Echevarría (*The Pride of Havana*, 1999) contributes substantially to knowledge of the Cuban pastime with a massive work that purports to be a thoroughgoing history of the subject and at least partially serves precisely that function. University of Texas historian Milton Jamail (*Full Count*, 2000) has also treated the contemporary Cuban League scene but with emphasis more on the structure and post-revolution organization of Cuban baseball and the seeming full-blown crisis the island sport faces at the outset of the 21st century. *Sports Illustrated* staff writer S.L. Price (*Pitching Around Fidel*, 2000) has also emphasized baseball on the island in his more expansive look at the overall plight of crack athletes in Cuba during declining economic conditions of the past decade. My own earlier contribution was an elaborate coffee table picture book (*Smoke*, 1999), a collaboration with baseball photo archivist Mark Rucker designed to preserve a rare pictorial record of the Cuban pastime. But there are obvious shortcomings in each of these books that now justify a more searching look at the Cuban national game.

One special problem remains a maze of inconsistency

that surrounds reporting of Cuban baseball history down through the decades. The sparse collection of noteworthy books published through the years in Cuba itself also share this not unimportant deficiency. A landmark early-century island-published tome by Raúl Díez Muro (*Historia del base ball profesional de Cuba*, 1949) reveals to the careful reader or researcher an almost endless catalogue of errors in its reported scores, seasonal standings and player statistics. The few works treating post-1960 Cuban League action hardly fare much better. The somewhat more contemporary *Viva y en Juego* (Casas, Alfonso and Pestana, 1986) is far more accurate but reveals a post-revolution socialist enthusiasm strewn with excessive rhetorical cliché. My own text in *Smoke* regrettably failed to substantially correct many of these existing flaws. There are, for example, entries found in *Smoke's* "Cuban Baseball Chronology" that sustain myths or repeat earlier sloppy reporting, which only my own most recent research has begun to unravel and supplant with more accurate accounts. González Echevarría's *The Pride of Havana* (published the same year as *Smoke*) still offers the most detailed and comprehensive history of island professional and amateur baseball while at the same time failing to escape its own nightmare of factual errors and infelicities. Most notable perhaps are difficulties González Echevarría experiences in sorting out ballplayer names (also officials and writers) and maintaining consistency in their correct spellings (Bart Giamatti/Giamatti, Moises Quintana/Quintero, Laird Bergard/Bergad, Murray Franklyn/Franklin, Santiago Ulrich/Ullrich, Ron/Don Blasingame, Lourdes Gorriel/Gourriel, Buck O'Neill/O'Neil, Willy/Willie Miranda, Bobby Thompson/Thomson, Sendaharu/Sadaharu Oh, Robert Fynch/Finch, Adrian Zavala/Zabala, Wilbur/Wilmur Fields, Johnny/Johnny Lipon, Gerald/Donald Honig, etc.). Some of these nagging inaccuracies admittedly fall into the category of mere unsightly typographical errors. If this is a minor distraction in the end, more troubling is the profusion of incorrect dates, chronologies, event names and locations when it comes to reporting Cuba's many glorious triumphs and few rare stumbles during 20th-century world amateur competitions. (I return to this issue in Chapter 7.)

In the spirit of complete fairness, my own work in *Smoke*, as noted, reveals its own share of errors, oversights, and inaccuracies — a certain portion of which were again a result of less than perfect editing. I have applied myself in this more thoroughgoing work to setting the record straight on some of these earlier missteps, as well as adding substantially to that record as amended by nearly five years of subsequent arduous research into Cuba's often murky baseball past. All of us tackling the existing records of the island sport have suffered substantially from the dense jungle of errors carried by primary texts such as those by Díez Muro and by Delgado and Nieto (*Béisbol Cubano: Récorde y Estadísticas*, 1955) that have long been taken too uncritically as bibles on the subject. My hope here is to finally expunge some of the worst inconsistencies. That is to say, hopefully to clear up some of the mess once and for all to the degree that this is today even possible. One aid in this effort has been the unpublished yet invaluable research carried

on in Havana in recent decades by eighty-year-old Severo Nieto Fernández himself, and also by an equally dedicated and authoritative Alberto Pestana (still today employed as a Cuban League statistician and historical archivist). Both men have been generous in discussing and sharing their many emendations and corrections of earlier works — both their own and those of others. Nieto, especially, has sorted out much of the record on early-century professional Cuban League play. And Pestana is the best living source for notebooks crammed full of data on Cuba's international play both before and after the baseball-reshaping 1959 revolution. (Some of Pestana's invaluable data on World Cup and Olympic events has been also reprised in Chapter 10 of my recent *Diamonds around the Globe: The Encyclopedia of International Baseball*, 2005.)

Professor González Echevarría has provided the most thoroughgoing history to date, for all his book's minor editorial shortcomings. *The Pride of Havana* nonetheless suffers as a scholarly work from an affliction not uncommon to even the best of baseball historians. The author's frequent tendency is to color events with personal nostalgia. Cuba's Golden Age is thus quite predictably found to be the one he grew up with and the one when he himself was first thrilled by island play as an impressionable youngster. Couple this with a tenaciously held political opposition toward the Castro government and thus nearly all changes it soon brought to the island and González Echevarría's view is one that inevitably over-plays baseball glories from the thirties and forties while at the same time sweeping conveniently under the carpet as nearly worthless all baseball achievements of the past near half-century.

There is also substantial weakness in González Echevarría's efforts at establishing a 1947 pennant-deciding series between Almendares and Habana ball clubs as the true apogee for all of Cuban baseball. There were indeed glorious achievements to be found everywhere throughout the early and mid-20th-century seasons on Cuban diamonds, both in Havana's winter professional circuit and the amateur games and leagues that spread across the island. But it is equally true that Cuba never owned what could be considered a truly national baseball enterprise before the transforming events of the late-fifties socialist revolution. And the league baseball being played during the vaunted (by González Echevarría) 1940s and fifties era was as much as anything a reflection of a decadent sport already falling into rapid decline.

The late fifties saw public interest waning (particularly outside Havana) in Cuban League professional games, especially with the wildly popular Almendares and Habana teams now falling on hard times and the fan-poor Cienfuegos and Marianao clubs thus capturing five of a final half-dozen pennants. The AAA Cuban Sugar Kings drew small and even negligible crowds at the new Havana Gran Stadium throughout their brief history that commenced in 1954 and died suddenly with revolutionary furor surrounding the anti-Batista guerrilla movement. After the 1959 revolution, however, baseball once again seized an entire island as it had not done for years and even decades. Stadiums overflowed throughout the island during the 1960s and '70s and new parks were soon being built

in most provincial capitals (Camagüey, Pinar del Río, Matanzas, Sancti Spiritus, Holguín, Santiago de Cuba, etc.). The baseball re-organization under Cuban government control that emerged in the sixties was for the first time one that existed solely for benefit of the collective Cuban people and thus was no longer controlled and exploited as a convenient talent farm by U.S. professional organized baseball (which had established its hold over Cuban League affairs in the wake of an aborted 1946 attempt by Mexican millionaire Jorge Pasquel to establish his own rival major league operation by ruthlessly raiding American and Cuban talent). Cuba, after 1962, for the first time truly boasted its own genuine national sport — one that was not merely an outpost of the American white or black professional game — just as on other social, economic and political fronts the regenerated country at long last had finally achieved its own non-American and non-Spanish national identity.

University of North Carolina cultural historian Louis Pérez, Jr. eloquently captures much of the connection between Cuba's nineteenth-century national origins and the foundations of the island's national game of baseball. Professor Pérez demonstrates exhaustively in his marvelous recent book *On Becoming Cuban* (1998) how Cubans of the fifties had ultimately become fed up as a society with their loss of national identity and with related wholesale submergence of everything that was natively Cuban to the pervasive intrusion of all that was covetously and embarrassingly North American. Baseball was certainly no exception in this danger-fraught cultural equation. It is no more surprising, then, that the Cubans would reject American control on the baseball diamond (in the guise of MLB-controlled organized baseball) than that they should — in a fit of patriotism and national pride — finally throw off the economic bonds that had long exploited their sugar industry, utility companies and other natural resources for exclusive benefit of absentee foreign investors or profit-driven North American imperialists.

In sum, Roberto González Echevarría has written a valuable book recapturing baseball's lost Caribbean origins born in Cuba during the final decades of the 19th century and matured with Havana's winter league scene during the first half of the 20th century. But his portrait remains rather incomplete in detail and somewhat wrongly focused through ideology. What I am suggesting here is that if *The Pride of Havana* is intended as a comprehensive history of baseball played in Cuba — and not merely as the nostalgic portrait of Cuba's long-gone winter league scene from a half-century distant — then fully half of its 400-plus pages might well be expected to treat Cuba's contemporary (post-Fidel) baseball scene. Dismissal of the current amateur Cuban League on the excuse that it is not of big-league caliber is in the end a major disservice to the rather substantial impact of Cuba's full baseball history. The subject should never be reduced to Cuban baseball as seen solely in the glare of major league events and achievements. Cuban baseball of the past forty years — played altogether free from organized pro baseball's iron grip — is in and of itself a most engaging untold story. It is not important

what arguments may rage about levels of play in Cuba as measured by pro standards of fundamental skill or consistent performance. The quality of baseball as fan spectacle must never to be judged solely by the raw talent of participating athletes alone. (It is also equally defensible that the value of pre-integration Negro league baseball as an American cultural institution never rested on any convincing argument that a majority of Negro league stars could have performed successfully in the majors, or may now merit bronze plaques at Cooperstown.) There are other relevant factors at play, like unwavering fan enthusiasm, arresting and colorful on-field spectacle, spontaneous growth of underpinning legends and myths, and — most important of all — the sport's reflection of a sustaining and recognizable national character.

Other major histories of Cuban baseball — those written in Spanish and not English — are also marred by often debilitating incompleteness. The standard reference work of Delgado and Nieto (*Béisbol Cubano: Récoros y Estadísticas*, 1955), published only in Cuba, is a half-century out of date and thus misses altogether all important baseball of post-revolutionary Cuba. The same is true of the classic tome provided by Díez Muro (*Historia de base ball profesional de Cuba*, 1949), which provides most data and guidelines for the subsequent handbook by Delgado and Nieto. Both books are also either mad-deningly inaccurate or regrettably incomplete when it comes to providing year-by-year standings and individual player statistics. More recent but still unpublished data compiled by Severo Nieto over the past four decades (and subsequently shared with this author in Havana) allows for a good deal of correction and updating of these two helpful but altogether unreliable classics.

A self-published Spanish-language illustrated history by California-based Cuban expatriate Angel Torres (*La Leyenda del Béisbol Cubano*, 1996) makes the identical assumptions found in *The Pride of Havana* about post-revolutionary baseball, and thus also leaves some of the more important chapters of the sport's island saga completely blank. Yet the Miami-published (Torres) and Havana-published (Delgado and Nieto) volumes actually both surpass González Echevarría when it comes strictly to details of the pre-1961 Cuban professional winter league seasons. Both Spanish "encyclopedias" provide much in the way of background statistics ignored by González Echevarría's exclusively narrative account of pre-Castro-era baseball. Year-by-year recaps provided by Torres include not only pennant-race reviews but also helpful summaries of individual league leaders and team standings. Delgado and Nieto also offer semi-complete Cuban League records for several dozen of the island's top professional winter league performers (Negro leaguers like Monte Irvin, Joe Black and Terry McDuffie and white American major leaguers like Ed Roebuck, Ken Boyer and Don Blasingame are included). These were the best encyclopedic works previously available, at least as far as what they cover; but by reading them one gets the distinct impression that the entire island of Cuba mysteriously sank into Caribbean waters immediately after the final pitch of the 1961 Havana professional season.

Milton Jamail (*Full Count*, 2000) is one American writer who does not shy away from baseball in the Castro era, but rather takes the contemporary Cuban League as his own main story line. Jamail is thoroughgoing in his detailing of precisely how the current Cuban baseball system works and he is especially helpful in describing such background matters as the organization and function of Cuban sports academics and training schools. His pointed analysis of current/recent problems on the Cuban scene and his recommendations for solutions will not, however, sit easy with many Cuban baseball observers. Jamail's beat as a *Baseball America* reporter has long been major league scouting and recruiting in Latin America, and he thus not surprisingly approaches Cuba from precisely this perspective. He sees defecting players largely as liberated slaves finally able to achieve the financial rewards they merit by playing in baseball's most glorious realm of the U.S. major leagues; he also assumes Cuban fans will one day extract great pleasure from watching local stars performing via television in the far distant venues of New York or Houston; he ignores any notion that these same Havana fanatics will be just as likely dismayed by resulting empty stadiums in Havana or Santiago once the bulk of local talent has fled northward. My own opinion is that Jamail has misread much of what today's Cuban baseball is all about, and thus what it has to offer both the Cuban and visiting North American spectator. He is right on target with many of his assessments, such as his notion that Fidel repeatedly views baseball as a legitimate arena for scoring large-scale propaganda victories on a convenient international stage. But Jamail seems never to see the proverbial forest for the trees when it comes to an overall assessment and appreciation of what are Cuban baseball's most glorious elements. From his perspective the 45-year isolation of Cuban baseball has been largely a tragic loss to U.S. big league fans and general managers, rather than a huge boon to Cuban fans who — as an unintended by-product — still own baseball's single remaining alternative universe.

My own focus in this book is fixed precisely on those special elements that make Cuba's game one of the true treasures of international baseball play. My approach has been historical, and I detail Cuba's baseball past as a means to understanding and more fully appreciating its inherited baseball present. My position is not strictly political in tone, though I doggedly maintain a largely pro-revolution posture on Cuba when it comes to matters of baseball aesthetics and the continued purity of the non-commercialized Cuban pastime. One does not have to support the entire scope of Fidel Castro's political enterprise in order to value a Cuban baseball system still free from the big business trappings that have nearly wrecked our current corporate major league sport.

My slant on Cuban baseball admittedly also reflects strong bias toward the beauties of international amateur sport, plus equally outspoken misgivings about what I take to be the sad state of today's major league baseball industry — rampant commercialism and a greed-driven business focus that together have sadly warped a former national pastime into a made-for-television entertainment event today so unpalatable to most

past-era fans. I do not argue either for or against the Castro socialist experiment per se. I do largely agree with Milton Jamail and others that the long-standing U.S. economic sanctions aimed against Cuba have over the years benefited only Havana and Washington politicians, while at the same time ignoring disenfranchised citizens in both nations. I fully realize, as well, that Cuban baseball in the final analysis will have to change drastically in the not too distant future, if only because the tired and largely failed Cuban revolution must soon give way little by little to more open economic and culture exchanges with the colossus to the north. Cuba's post-revolution national pastime will soon regrettably lose its innocence, just as big league baseball long ago also did, once exclusive focus in the sport inevitably becomes financial gains for franchise owners, ballplayers, and media moguls rather than innocent pleasures of fans longing only for the unrestrained joy of experiencing the most perfect game among man's inventions. But I am certainly not rooting for any acceleration in that inevitable process.

My approach here in retelling Cuban baseball history is to divide my volume into four distinct sections. The first celebrates four truly legendary idols of Cuban baseball; Martín Dihigo, Adolfo Luque, Orestes Miñoso and Conrado (Connie) Marrero each receive their own biographical and analytical chapters. Martín Dihigo (a versatile black giant who once paced the exotic Mexican League in both batting and pitching in the same season) was unarguably Cuba's greatest-ever sporting icon. Luque (winner of a still-franchise-record 27 games in 1923 for the National League Cincinnati Reds) made the first substantial Cuban splash in the American big leagues. Miñoso (Chicago's original "Go-Go" White Sox speedster) first brought the novel flash and pizzazz of Latino-style baseball to our North American consciousness during the post-integration nineteen-fifties. And the pixie-like, cigar-puffing Marrero (best remembered by American fans as an enigmatic 40-year-old Washington Senators rookie) was the island's biggest amateur-era star, even though his career came well before the post-revolution apex of Cuba's celebrated amateur game.

Part II is devoted to Cuba's various showcase leagues — amateur and professional, pre-revolution and post-Fidel. Chapter 5 summarizes the full history of Cuba's professional winter league that was first launched on the island a mere two years after the founding of America's granddaddy National League and only survived (sometimes just barely) as a jewel of winter Caribbean baseball until the mid-century arrival of the fateful Castro-led revolution. Chapter 6 recounts the careers and contributions of lesser-known stars (Cuban and American) from a glorious blackball barnstorming era that was Cuba's special legacy during a blighted epoch existing before racial integration in U.S. organized baseball. Had segregation of the races never existed on North American diamonds, it is more than likely that forgotten players named Dihigo, Méndez, Torriente and Oms (among numerous black Cuban legends of that era) might well have been the Clementes, Marichals, Miñosos and Alous of the explosive big league decades separating the two great wars.

The heady tale of Cuban amateur baseball and the miraculous domination of Cuban teams on the world tournament scene also merits its own thorough-going coverage (Chapters 7 and 8), complete with extensive details on each and every top international competition played during the 20th century and beyond (including World Cup, Intercontinental Cup, Pan American and Central American Games, and Olympics). Here an exciting story unfolds of numerous major world tournaments, beginning with the world amateur championships inaugurated in the early 1940s and lately called the Baseball World Cup, and culminating with bitterly-fought USA-Cuba Olympic showdowns in Atlanta and Sydney at century's end. Special focus is placed here on a landmark 1999 Pan American Games confrontation at Winnipeg between skilled Cuban amateurs and the Canada, Dominican and American squads stocked for the first time with rosters of high-level minor league professionals. The Winnipeg Olympic-style experiment (one this author witnessed first-hand) provided perhaps the most thrilling international baseball competitions found anywhere on record.

Part III of the book is devoted to the lasting and far-reaching legacies of Cuban baseball history. Chapter 9 both explores and explodes the wildly popular myth portraying Fidel Castro as reported big league pitching prospect of the forties and reviews the consequences of that enduring quasi-legend. Also reviewed in a separate chapter (Chapter 10) is the entire saga of Cuba's substantial contributions to big league baseball before the fluid Cuban talent pipeline was rudely closed down after 1960 in the shadow of worsening USA-Cuba diplomatic relations. Additional chapters treat unknown superstars (Chapter 11) from recent decades of Cuban League play, plus the full story of the past decade's tentative efforts at baseball détente (Chapter 12), including the over-hyped if under-analyzed saga of Cuba's big league defectors during the 1990s, and the generally misunderstood Baltimore Orioles vs. Team Cuba exhibition series in spring 1999 with its intriguing implications for possible future working accords between the world's two foremost baseball-playing nations.

The fourth and final part offers the most comprehensive collections of Cuban baseball statistics (for both pre-revolution and post-revolution eras) found in any English language publication. Year-by-year team champions and individual league leaders are provided in Appendix D for both pre-1959 and post-1962 Cuban leagues, including the season and career individual pitching and batting leaders and all major category record holders. There is a detailed 140-year Cuban baseball chronology (Appendix A) collecting the important landmark events involving both Cuban big leaguers and island-based play. For Negro baseball enthusiasts there is also a Blackball Register (Appendix B), which documents, year-by-year, all legitimate Cuban teams and individual Cuban ballplayers on both barnstorming teams and established Negro league clubs. And there are also complete rosters and career statistics for all Cubans who played in the major leagues (Appendix C), as well as for all players (Appendix D) who appeared on Castro-era Cuban national teams between 1962 and 2005.

* * *

Nearly a decade of extensive Cuba travel has provided this author with something closely akin to a life-altering experience. My ingrained perspective on my own native land — which so centrally prizes its avowed commitments to personal freedom and political democracy — could not help but be somewhat filtered by experiencing firsthand a foreign land which I had long been taught to believe existed under a grueling reign of political oppression and offered few opportunities for unfettered self-expression. It does not take much time in Cuba to discover that alternative forms of political administration do not always mean obliteration of all cherished political liberties. My own first-hand experience in Cuba — if not altering my deep appreciation for the many blessing of our own native land — has also increased my awareness of callous American excesses. While residents of New York, Chicago or Miami may boast greater liberties at the polling places and greater freedom of choice in the market place, they enjoy little of the average Cuban's freedom from fear of walking local neighborhood streets, freedom from rank abuses of a capitalist marketplace, or freedom from the insidious forces of institutionalized racism and sexism. Havana is not only the most charming but also easily the safest capital city whose streets I have been privileged to visit. And if the structures of local government and the pressures of cultural expectation are indeed quite different, Cuba today is anything but a brutal police state or a virtual political prison. The Cuban people are among the most hospitable, charming, life-loving and resilient of any I have ever known. And when it comes to our present subject of baseball, the Cuban version of the game — more because of than in spite of its freedoms from U.S. major league style professional spectacles — has restored for this writer a love for the American/Cuban game that had earlier been almost entirely destroyed in the late 1980s and early nineties by the self-serving shenanigans of big league players and owners alike.

Many have shared quite intimately my personal Cuban adventure over the past nine-plus years. First on the scene was Mark Rucker, my partner in the project that produced *Smoke*, my first book about the Cuban national pastime and the publishing project of which I remain most proud to this day. It was Mark who conceived and fostered the original idea to visit the island and to write about Cuban baseball, and without Mark's hefty push in the early stages of the *Smoke* enterprise I would have never known either Cuba or the life-shifting experiences that it has gifted to us both. *Baseball America* writer Milton Jamail and Texas Rangers radio broadcaster Eric Nadel — two transplanted Texans who comment on the game with eloquence and insight — have crossed my path on more than one Cuban junket and have provided endless valuable input on the subject of *pelota cubana*. Bob Weinstein has beaten more byways and pathways in Cuba with me than anyone else and has inevitably enriched my days there as much as anyone. I would be remiss not also to mention that my first reading in 1999 of Roberto González Echevarría's *The Pride of Havana* was an inspiration as well as an extensive education,

even if the esteemed professor and I occupy distinctly opposite corners in any debate about either Cuban politics or Cuban baseball.

But I am most heavily indebted to my two constant Cuban companions and *compañeros*, Ismael Sené and Martín

Hachoun (no pseudonyms here, thank you!), spiritual brothers without whom Cuba over the years simply would never have been anywhere near the same *béisbol paradiso*. *Gracias por todo, mis hermanos.*

Introduction

All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their mind, wake in the day to find that it was vanity. But the dreamers of the day are dangerous men for they may act their dreams with open eyes. This I did.

—T.E. Lawrence

An almost surreal scene of flood-lit infield ballet enveloped a most perfect of all possible baseball backdrops. The arresting setting on this special night was a classic concrete and steel ballpark of immediate post-war vintage. Stretched out before me was a true picture-post-card scene — a cavernous stadium filled with ghostly shadows of countless ballgames past, fading green paint peeling from sprawling wooden grandstand seats, a single-decked arena tucked under a cantilevered ceiling that reached from foul pole to foul pole, distant green-hued cement outfield bleachers topped by a massive quartet of towering electric light stanchions. In the background fifty thousand-plus raucous fans kept up their constant din of enthusiasm to support on-field action as the home club edged toward a narrow and thus especially thrilling victory. Remarkably absent from this scene were any of the more commonplace distractions that define more familiar late-twentieth-century big league theme-park stadiums — with their erector-set retractable roofs, their skyscraper-proportion video scoreboards, the endless corridors of food courts and gift shops, and the ever-present surrounding blare of screaming electronic commercial chatter. In my own mind's eye this was truly baseball resurrected from a time long past and but dimly remembered — from an epoch long before our North American professional league parks were somehow converted *en masse* into garish shopping malls while at the same time being transformed into oversized and plastic-carpeted television sound stages.

The time frame is late October of 2003 and the exotic locale is Havana, Cuba. The game on tap this particular night was a nail-biting struggle between national teams representing heavily favored reigning champion Cuba and upstart, upset-minded yet outmanned Brazil. It was opening night of medal round games in international baseball's World Cup XXXV, an event unknown to American fans but now being staged for the fifth time since the mid-fifties on the tradition-riddled diamond of Havana's Estadio Latinoamericano (and for a tenth time overall here in amateur baseball's world capital). The ballpark itself was a key player in the charming scene, an unparalleled fifty-five-year-old crumbling edifice that had somehow ruggedly survived

the full half-century of virtual isolation imposed by Cold War politics on a still-proud Cuban national pastime. On this recent warm October night the vaunted Cuban national team — equal in talent to almost any big league twenty-five-man roster — would be surprisingly extended to the very brink of disaster by an over-achieving Brazilian club, itself boasting little in the way of recognized baseball tradition, yet on this night nonetheless riding the potent arm of a talented Japanese-trained industrial league hurler who fittingly picked this precise moment to uncork the surprise game of his life.

The nostalgic setting and thrilling play experienced this special night in Havana's Latin American Stadium perfectly captures Cuba's rare baseball enterprise at its showcase best. But this was also a marquee moment for a more-muted parallel world of "amateur" international championship baseball — a universe long collectively ignored by U.S. baseball fans, major media outlets, and the head-stuck-in-the-sand corporate power-brokers today guiding the fortunes of North America's professional organized baseball. This moment alone seemed proof positive that there is indeed a thriving alternative baseball universe, one as far off the beaten path of mainstream baseball action as were — in another earlier era — outlawed Negro leagues and unwanted dark-skinned ballplayers who also performed in unheralded games staged in the dim shadows everywhere across back-roads America.

Such showcase games found in today's baseball-crazy Cuba do not come without a steep price for curious North American visitors; they even extract a heavy toll on native island rooters immune to luxurious trappings of big league games matching millionaire athletes and housed in gaudy pleasure-dome settings. First and foremost is the issue of creature comforts: the wooden seats in Havana are unbearably hard and uneven, the ballpark restrooms are distastefully unsanitary and even quite primitive, concession and souvenir stands are rare, and the only ballpark fare usually available is steaming hot and stale black Cuban coffee dispensed in small squirts from lunchbox-style fifties-era thermos bottles and then gulped from tiny finger-scorching paper cups. Stadium outfield and grandstand lighting is reminiscent of backwater

rookie-league ball fields of the 1940s and scoreboards rarely carry anything beyond the batting orders and line scores. Cuban League uniforms of late also look more appropriate to local industrial league softball attire: caps are one-size-fits-all adjustable items and a single design for home and away nylon shirts (differing in color and team name only) is universally adopted by the entire league.

Yet even if the physical setting and outward trappings are more suggestive of semi-pro venues than of top-level pro ball, it is nonetheless a small price to pay for recovering the spectacle of baseball as it was once played in our own youth. Cuban baseball is — in every sense, positive and negative — a very far cry from the bat-and-ball spectacles today altered almost beyond recognition by made-for-TV versions of North America's floundering national pastime.

Just reaching a Cuban ballpark has become exceedingly difficult of late for any American *aficionado* pursuing such extraordinary entertainment pleasure. The largest hurdle remains a long-standing U.S. government travel ban, one sanctioned by Helms-Burton legislation designed to force political change on the island by stemming the flow of American dollars into Fidel Castro's faltering economy. This restriction on the rights of our citizens to visit the communist nation takes the form of long-standing requirements for a U.S. Treasury Department travel license issued by OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) and only available for certain approved academic research or humanitarian and cultural exchanges. American tourism to Cuba remains strictly taboo under Helms-Burton sanctions, despite forty years of evidence that such restrictions have done nothing to shake the foundations of Castro's socialist government or to bring about any of the fuzzy American political objectives.

Big Brother's watchful eye on Americans attempting to sneak through OFAC's protective net has only intensified in the aftermath of our 9–11 inspired war on terrorism. The Bush Administration's increased nation-building efforts aimed at Iraq and other perceived evil empires (countries, like Cuba, outspokenly opposing what many in Third World outposts increasingly see as American "imperialism") have now meant further elevated hassles for those intrepid Americans who would exercise their freedoms by venturing into such forbidden foreign territory. Even legal (OFAC licensed) travelers to Cuba have in recent months had to battle with increased surveillance inspired by President Bush's intensified attentions to these celebrated (if not entirely popular) Homeland Security measures.

My own travel to Cuba since 1996 has been entirely legal under OFAC provisions that provide for trips by fulltime academics engaged in legitimate Cuba studies and capable of demonstrating likely probability of publication. Having made more than thirty trips to the island since February 1997, to collect data and photographs and conduct interviews related to my earlier book *Smoke* (co-authored with Mark Rucker), as well as to this present volume, I have rarely encountered more than routine questions from U.S. immigration officers about my appropriate OFAC license status on either departure for or arrival from Cuba. With my regular venue for travel being

the sanctioned charter flights that depart several times weekly from Miami International Airport, I had always found legal (OFAC approved) travelers to be courteously treated and rarely hassled by Miami-based immigration and customs authorities. But that picture would change quite radically on one recent trip in late October 2003.

On route to Havana for a final round of fact checking related to this current volume — and also on assignment to cover World Cup XXXV for *Baseball America* — I received a bitter taste of the new OFAC enforcement efforts that had kicked into effect only that very week, on the heels of President Bush's latest national radio address once more promising to get tough on Americans who persisted on venturing behind enemy lines in Fidel's forbidden island. Despite the continued validity of my general license permission — still very much on the OFAC books — and despite a normal procedure of filing required travel affidavits with the charter airline on which I was flying, my progress was blocked at the boarding gate by uniformed Homeland Security officers for the first time checking passports and OFAC travel licenses of all Americans attempting to board the Havana-bound flight.

Excessive details about the tense momentary scene that followed are neither welcome nor appropriate in a book devoted to baseball; and yet the raw facts do bear on the subject of Washington's iron-fisted control over everything Cuban, including baseball. In brief, I had to convince attending agents that specific licenses (ones issued on OFAC letterhead with specific dates for a sanctioned trip) were indeed not required for general license category academic researchers. The day was only saved when in desperation I unpacked from my carry-on luggage one of my earlier-issued "specific license" OFAC permissions dated from December 1999 (I always carry one with me) and also agreed to a possible interview with OFAC officials upon my return stateside. The upshot of the matter was that Homeland Security guards newly assigned to monitor Cuba flights in October 2003 had never been briefed about general license provisions and were apparently instructed to clear specific license travelers only, regardless of what existing laws might still sanction. Upon my return to Miami I was told by a U.S. Customs inspector examining my bags for permitted Cuban rum and cigars (licensed travelers are allowed one bottle and one box) that he indeed knew of my right to travel on general license provisions but that he had now been instructed by OFAC administrators to tell general license travelers that they were being "unofficially discouraged" from choosing this still-legal travel route, and that they ought to seek a specific license for each trip if they "didn't want to be hassled" either when leaving or re-entering homeland borders. The point of such personal history — however extraneous to baseball matters at hand — is merely to underscore a fact that even for legal Cuba travelers, efforts to reach the distant venues of Cuba's isolated alternative baseball universe today constitute anything but a routine or comfortable adventure.

But on the night of October 22, 2003, all such annoyances were temporarily obliterated by the purity of the Cuban baseball scene at hand. The night was truly electric as a boisterous

if not quite overflowing partisan throng welcomed each base hit and every slick fielding play made by their beloved Cuban national team. Partisans and more neutral observers alike anticipated a laughably one-sided affair — likely even a “knockout” that would end prematurely with the rule suspending play once either team amasses a ten-run lead after seven “official” innings (6½ frames if the home club is leading). The hosts anticipated breezing to another patented easy victory in their opening medal round match against a Brazil team boasting few names recognizable even to regulars on the international baseball scene and carrying no trappings of historical tradition in the sport that is Cuba’s very national lifeblood.

But such are the potential marvels of any baseball game that a single masterful pitching performance might well equalize almost any mismatch; on this rare night that unexpected virtuoso performance came via a Brazilian hurler named Kleber Tomita whose ancestral roots were Japanese and whose baseball training was also the product of recent summer service in a top-level Japanese industrial league. Tomita handcuffed a befuddled Cuban lineup for eight innings and soon disaster stared the home forces squarely in the face after a solo homer put the Brazilians on top in the opening half of the final frame.

Yet the legacy of more than a half-century of Cuban domination in international baseball venues is so palpable at times that miracle finishes have all but become an anticipated culmination of almost any such nail-biting tournament challenge. The teeming Havana crowd of better than 50,000 would be forced to hold their collective breath only briefly before this year’s young slugging stars — infielders Yulieski Gourriel and Kendry Morales — would offer up the joy-unleashing lightning strokes to rudely burst Tomita’s impossible dream and scuttle Brazil’s near-miracle. Yulieski’s towering opposite-field-triple topped by Kendry’s follow-up ringing homer deep into the right-field grandstand capped the night’s exciting near-upset with stunning suddenness. For this enthralled observer it seemed nothing short of one of those once-in-a-lifetime climactic finishes — a moment resplendent with images of Bobby Thomson, Bill Mazeroski and Joe Carter all rolled into one, a rare instant which coalesced the innumerable thrills and unsurpassed beauties which for me have become the very warp and woof as well as the yin and yang that is today’s incomparable Cuban baseball.

* * *

Each and every outsider who has chased after nostalgia in Cuba’s quaint ballparks has his favorite indelible images of a



Cuban super fan and local baseball expert Ismael Sené (center), with the author (left) and fellow author-photographer Mark Rucker at Regla ballpark near Havana in December 1999 (courtesy Transcendental Graphics).

remarkable island baseball culture that is today fast-fading and even threatened with imminent if not immediate demise. For Milton Jamail in his recent book *Full Count* it is a scene that the author witnessed outside Havana’s aging Estadio Latinoamericano only hours before a league game between the formidable Pinar del Río club and the local favorite Havana Industriales nine. Arriving two hours before game time Jamail stumbled upon a pickup game in the streets fronting one of the park’s main entrances. It was a contest featuring rag-tag players mostly pushing middle age, competing with carved sticks and broom handles for bats, tightly wound twine for a makeshift ball, and flattened cardboard boxes serving for bases. Surrounding the informal pickup match was a crowd of rapt spectators that included the entire roster of the just-arrived Industriales team already attired in their uniform pants, tee shirts, and baseball cleats. While the hometown league players joined a growing crowd to cheer on rivals in this commonplace street pickup game, fans mixed with local diamond heroes and everyone remained fixated on the heated stick-ball action. No one pestered the mingling Industriales stars for handshakes or for autographs, or even seemed to acknowledge their presence. In Jamail’s own words it was an inspired moment “harkening back to images of the game long past in the United States.”

Such rare moments, shared by just about any visitor to the engaging and often disarming Cuban baseball scene, never fail to expose the warts as well as the considerable wonders of a national pastime that is nearly as old as its North American predecessor and every bit as much — perhaps even more — a vital element of the national consciousness that sustains it. If Jamail’s personal version of such mind-binding moments of “surprise filled with inspiration” surrounding Cuban ballpark

culture came with that one pickup game outside Havana's Latin American Stadium, my own similar moments seem almost too frequent to catalogue. They may also seem less remarkable in any subsequent retelling. Yet they are nonetheless burned indelibly into my own growing inventory of Cuban baseball images.

Perhaps my own most cherished recollection came after a league game in Pinar del Río and unfolded when Mark Rucker and I joined a pair of Cuban hosts for a two-hour auto ride (in their rust-eaten Russian-model Lada) along the desolate rural highway linking Pinar with Havana. Our companions — officials of Cuba's national sports ministry who had driven us to the western province on one of our earliest visits to Cuban ballparks in February 1997 — were almost as unfamiliar with the maze of village streets surrounding Estadio Capitán San Luis as we were. The result was an increasingly futile backstreet search to locate an avenue that might take us directly to the lost highway entrance.

Disoriented amidst tangles of similar-looking dark side streets, we eventually stumbled on the lighted entrance to what appeared to be a combination bar and grocery shop offering assorted staples and soft drinks. Requesting help at the shadowy doorway after explaining our sad plight, we were promptly joined by a smiling and strapping bare-chested black-skinned athlete attired only in dirt-stained baseball pants and stocking feet, sporting a gym bag slung over one shoulder and a handsome female companion clinging to the other. A shocking realization hit us immediately that the familiar face was that of Pinar ace pitcher Pedro Luis Lazo, still in partial uniform and obviously wending his own way home on foot only moments after the final ninth-inning out. The amused pitcher merely chuckled at the confusion of these "foreigners" from Havana and immediately jumped on his hardscrabble Chinese bicycle rescued from inside the shop entrance way. As though this were a normal nightly occurrence, Lazo waved to us to follow and then proceeded to peddle through several blocks of dusty streets the size of alleyways until he had safely deposited us alongside the highway entrance ramp. Having a good laugh with Mark over the surreal incident as we raced through the night-time darkness on route back to Havana, I could only keep asking myself (as I have many times since) what the chances would ever have been of running into Whitey Ford or Allie Reynolds or Roger Clemens trudging on foot a dozen blocks from Yankee Stadium and then enlisting the assistance of a bicycle-peddling big leaguer in guiding us back in the direction of the Major Deegan Expressway.

A far sadder if equally amazing moment — also set in the distant island outpost of Pinar del Río — exposes the distinct downside of such all-pervasive Cuban baseball innocence. Traveling with a group of American photographers in February 2002, Mark Rucker and I again encountered the highly unexpected during a brief rest stop on the outskirts of the island's westernmost city. Waiting for the remainder of the contingent to attend to nature's callings before the long ride back to Havana, I innocently wandered into a small alcove adjacent to the Pinar del Río Hotel bar, located behind the main entrance-way lobby. What first caught my eye was shocking enough in its own right. Hanging against the wall, on ordinary wire coat hangers, were a trio of sharp red Cuban national team jerseys, displayed to reveal the numbers and names of local heroes Pedro Luis Lazo, Omar Ajete, and pitching coach Julio Romero — all current members of the Pinar del Río Cuban League team. The snazzy shirts were easily identifiable as game-worn jerseys from the Atlanta Olympic Games and thus constituted a primitive local excuse for something approximating a miniature hometown



The author (right) and a fellow American traveler (front) in dugout of Capitán San Luis Stadium with three members of Pinar del Río Cuban League team in February 2001.



Capitán San Luis Stadium in Pinar del Río, the prototype 1960s-era Cuban League ballpark.

baseball hall of fame. Nothing appeared to be in place (in the form of locks, cameras or even an attentive watchman) to provide even minimal security protection for such valuable pieces of memorabilia. The Olympic baseball shirts were easy pickings for any American visitor with a clue about their likely eBay market value. My first impulse was unobtrusively to search out Mark and quietly call to his attention something which I didn't want the rest of our party knowing about. But as I turned to depart the small room I was nearly floored by an even more disquieting sight. Next to the entranceway was something that had escaped my notice during my haste to view the display of treasured jerseys. Against the wall stood a modest unlocked glass display case (marred by an ugly crack across the top) boldly displaying original Atlanta gold medals earned in July 1996 by the same three ballplayers. There they rested, completely unguarded and yet apparently nonetheless relatively safe from any local tampering in this Third World town where petty theft or memorabilia profiteering are still completely foreign notions.

All such quaint and other-worldly moments do not necessarily transpire on the streets or in byways found outside the local ballpark. Game day action in the Cuban League stadium can also be surrounded by truly magical scenes — visions inconceivably far removed from the electronic din and commercial trappings encountered in today's big league venues. Cuban League games provide a North American visitor with a level of action and a collection of unknown yet polished stars hardly if at all distinguishable from those of any major league setting. But there are always unsettling surprises: often the spectacle has its own most disarming moments.

The most memorable big-time baseball game I have ever

witnessed was staged in January 2000 in the most unlikely environs of Havana's famed psychiatric hospital campus, the same locale where future "defector" and big-league post-season MVP Orlando "El Duque" Hernández labored in exile from the Cuban League during several months immediately preceding his much-celebrated 1997 dash to fame and riches with the professional American League New York Yankees. The contest, between Havana's hometown Metropolitanos and visiting Ciego de Avila, crystallized perfectly a chaotic world comprising much of Cuban League baseball.

Even before the day's first pitch was tossed or first bat swung, my constant Havana ballpark companion Isidro Saenz (an obvious if transparent pseudonym) would on this occasion provide an enriching historical backdrop for the afternoon's festive outing, as he had often done for so many others. This time it would take the form of some cogent insights drawn from Isidro's endless inventory of political humor, much of which — like this particular offering — features Cuba's indestructible *líder máximo* and supreme cultural father figure — Fidel Castro himself. But first some background scene-setting is in order.

Isidro and I had on the previous night witnessed a marvelous pitching duel staged by the same two tail-ender ball clubs at Latin American Stadium — a 2-1 13-inning nail-biter that seemed to reflect an entire 2000 National Series season that was being hobbled by an uncomfortable transition to wooden bats in the aftermath of a full quarter-century of using aluminum war clubs. Heavy slugging for which the Cuban League had long been noted would not be at all in evidence this particular winter. Home-run bashing had fallen off to such a degree that the individual league leader boasted only four



An outside view of Cristóbal Lara Stadium in Nueva Gerona, capital city of Isla de la Juventud. Cristóbal Lara, with its only grandstands and both dugouts along the first base line, provides Cuba's most unique baseball setting.

total dingers nearly halfway through the campaign. Batting averages around the circuit were anemic, and even run-of-the-mill pitchers were posting ERAs more appropriate for big-leaguers with names like Grove, Gibson, Clemens, Ford and Mathewson. When we arrived at tiny Manuel Fajardo Stadium on the Havana hospital campus for the rematch, we therefore had little reason not to expect yet another low-scoring squeaker of the type that had filled most of the past several months.

Before settling back in the languid sunshine to enjoy some classic game action, the unusual ballpark setting would briefly take center stage. It has become routine practice in recent seasons to stage Wednesday afternoon league contests in the smaller parks dotting each and every province, thus providing citizens outside the regional capitals with a chance to experience games close to home—one of the practices designed to lend truth to the notion that Cuban baseball (and Cuban sports in general) is truly “the peoples’ right and privilege.” Of these once-a-week venues, Manuel Fajardo Stadium ranks at the top of the list for both charm and quaintness. Seating only about 3,000 fans in the covered grandstand that runs from slightly outside third base to a few dozen feet beyond first base, the park features green tile-covered outfield walls about a dozen feet in height and backed from foul pole

to foul pole by an array of 30-foot-high green Lebanon cedars offering the most bucolic of possible settings.

External trappings in Fajardo Stadium are primitive to an extreme: all seats are merely numbered squares painted on thirty rows of smooth concrete bleachers; the infield is clay-filled and the outfield grass features an array of worn brown patches; a single scoreboard teetering above the right-field fence is little more than a schoolyard-style wood structure without any electronics, on which the line scores are strung out with painted tablets hung manually from wooden pegs. Behind the outfield wall, largely hidden amongst the ancient cedars, stand three silent rusty sentinels that once functioned as electric-light towers but long ago were stripped of all wiring and lamps. It all seemed lifted from some Hollywood film capturing American baseball between the world wars, a perfect setting for local high school action somewhere in Nebraska’s corn belt, vintage late thirties or early forties.

Fajardo Stadium nonetheless bears a name with considerable historical significance, plus a tradition of some luster in post-revolution Cuban baseball. Officially christened *Campo Deportivo Manuel “Piti” Fajardo* (Fajardo Sports Field), it memorializes a revolutionary hero who once served bravely as the platoon medic in the 1957–1958 Sierra Maestra campaign



Pre-game setting and pastoral view at Nueva Girona's Cristóbal Lara Stadium in January 2000.

alongside Fidel and Che. Constructed adjacent to the hospital grounds (a stone's throw from Havana's José Martí Airport) the structure served as setting for numerous amateur games for several decades; at one point the hospital even boasted a crack team at the provincial league level. After a period of relative neglect during the "Special Period" of economic hardship in the early nineties, the field was again resurrected as a part-time Cuban League venue in time for the 1998–99 National Series season.

The hospital grounds ballpark is also, quite coincidentally, home to one of Cuba's most delightful baseball legends clothed in political humor. And this is the very tale that Isidro Saenz began to relate only moments after our arrival in the grandstand on this particular January afternoon. As the humorous tale unfolds, Fidel and brother Raúl, Cuba's chief military commander, paid an inspection visit to the then-new hospital grounds in the mid or late sixties, shortly after the launching of Cuba's nearly two-decade entanglement with war-torn Angola. Passing by the stadium Fidel casually noticed a ballgame in progress and detoured to the grandstand to relax briefly while enjoying his own favorite pastime. The game in progress was a recreational outing for institutionalized inmates and both the field and surrounding stands were packed with residents who seemingly had minimal knowledge of Cuba's

national sport. As the strange game continued, Fidel and Raúl were astonished by such scenes as the pitcher winding up and tossing his deliveries over the backstop or into the dugout, some batters swinging and then running directly to third or second base, outfielders preoccupied not with chasing down fly balls but rather with scaling up the distant fences, and umpires tossing a dozen and more balls into play simultaneously.

As the story recounts, the sudden presence of Fidel and Raúl did not go unnoticed by one apparently very alert inmate seated in the nearby grandstand; the young man wasted little time in hastily approaching *el presidente* and attempting to gain an intimate personal audience. "Please *Comandante*," the fellow pleaded, "You have to help me. I am not crazy like these others but instead am a victim of jealous family members who had me committed here to serve their own perverse ends. I am as sane as any man in the street and you must redress this wrong and have me released before I truly do go mad!" Temporarily distracted by the visitor's babble, Fidel politely suggested that the poor fellow join his compatriots out on the field and stop running on so and thus interrupting the amusing spectacle.

But the desperate inmate only persisted. "*Comandante*, I am truly NOT crazy!" he barked. "Look how those fools carry on at baseball. Sane people like you and me know how this beautiful game of ours is supposed to be played." At which

point he launched into a detailed discussion of the finer points of *pelota* and in the process quickly had Fidel's full attention. The commander and chief was soon enough convinced that any man who knew the game so well could indeed not be nuts like the others and must indeed be a victim of some mix-up that had brought him to these grounds. Turning to Raúl, a magnanimous Fidel suggested an appropriate resolution for the poor man's plight. "Raúl," he instructed, "you can plainly see this fellow is a baseball connoisseur and not at all a crazy man. Make sure you get his name and begin procedures for his immediate release when we return to the office tomorrow morning. We need good citizens and truly bright men like this to help our cause in Angola." But before Fidel could utter another word the inmate had already begun fleeing toward the wall separating the grandstand from the field of play. "Excuse me," *Comandante*, he shouted over his shoulder while in full flight. "I hear my teammates shouting my name and I can't delay a moment more because they must need me now as a pinch hitter!"

The gag was not only precious but indeed most appropriate, as I was to discover as action began to unfold in Cuba's only ballpark housed on the grounds of a mental hospital. Although ballpark entry is free of any admission charge at Fajardo Stadium (Cubans are now charged one peso or four American cents for a grandstand ticket at Latin American Stadium, or three pesos for the prime reserved seats), the opening pitch was tossed with only perhaps five hundred fans scattered throughout the galleries. By the third inning, however, the stands began to fill to overflowing as several hundred in-

mates were released onto the grounds for afternoon recreation and many soon began making their way into the ballpark. It was a rare crowd of rooters to say the very least.

Most distinctive about the late arrivals was their uniforms consisting of faded blue jeans plus dingy blue or gray-toned long-sleeved canvas work shirts. Each carried (or rather wore) a tin drinking cup tied with a short, thick twine string to a side belt loop. Most were middle-aged or beyond, and the entire crowd seemed at first to be composed exclusively of men, though a few women with the identical close-cropped hairstyles would later be noticed as the game wore on. The first wave of two dozen or so denizens clustered together in rows immediately behind home plate; but as the population of inmates gradually swelled to six or seven hundred a few innings later, some had located only a few feet from us, closer to the first base dugout. While many sat statue-like through passing innings on the spot originally selected, others began to wander around aimlessly as the game droned on. As my attention occasionally returned to some of these locals — especially during between-inning lulls in play — I began to notice that some carried tattered backpacks containing a few personal items which appeared to consist of combs, paper-wrapped sandwiches and even a few school-style notebooks. It was during one of these interludes that I became aware that one crew-cut inmate puffing on a huge foot-long cigar and sporting brightly rouged cheeks after the fashion of a circus clown was indeed a sixty-something female and not the old man I at first mistook her for. By her side was a much younger black male with a bright costume feather lodged carefully behind his left ear.

Such local color was not restricted to the grandstands alone. One old-timer among the "crazies" (likely he was seventy-something), sported a floppy oversized white straw hat while wandering amongst the crowd near home plate; soon he ambled onto the field itself behind home during the bottom of the fourth, then strolled casually around in front of the third-base dugout — all to no one's apparent concern — before, just as unfettered, again exiting near home through the same grandstand barrier. A few innings later the arresting character danced lasciviously around home plate as between-innings rock music blared from the PA system. (The music itself was a rare occurrence for Cuban ballparks.) The self-appointed clown/mascot also stationed himself back on the field outside the third base foul line during late innings and began doing animated service as a retriever of foul balls drilled out in his direction. Whether he was only a tolerated inmate, a regular ballpark employee, or perhaps both, would remain an unsolved mystery. But his antics were soon to be overshadowed by



Mark Rucker (left) and the author at Palmar del Junco ballpark in Matanzas, site of Cuba's legendary first reported ballgame in December 1874.

other amusing grandstand high jinks, including a brief violent tug-of-war between two “crazies” over a backpack that one possessed and the other coveted, as well as a disheveled fifty-plus female inmate systematically working small clusters of grandstand “outsiders” and loudly inquiring after possible offers of a tasty cigar.

Such idyllic trappings and quaint historical overtones would only momentarily distract us from the circus of unfolding on-field baseball action. Offensive fireworks began quite early with Ciego de Avila’s muscular catcher Roger Machado first awakening a drowsy crowd by poling a towering blast far into the trees behind the left field fence in the top half of the second frame. Teammate Franklin López responded immediately with a nearly identical poke that provoked the rattled Metros pitcher to plunk the following batter on purpose and thus earn an immediate ejection from play. This was unusual action indeed in a season when novel wooden bats had seemingly pulled the plug entirely on offensive fireworks. But it was only a foreshadowing, for in the third López smacked yet another dinger, this time with the bases jammed. Before the onslaught finally spun to a halt with a knockout-rule-shortened seven-inning 18–5 victory for the visitors, a new league mark for single-game homers had been set with eight (one even poetically socked by a Metros outfielder named Cervantes). The true impact of the day’s extraordinary display of hitting could only later be fully appreciated when set against the fact that this was a season in which the eventual league home run champ would boast a mere ten. Two long smashes by López were his only pair of round-trippers for the entire campaign. Six homers by Ciego de Avila that day represented a full thirty percent of the club’s entire season’s total. Craziness on this rare Cuban League afternoon was hardly confined to exotic behaviors in the grandstand alone.

The rivals on this day were admittedly two of the league’s least talented rosters, a fact that might have either excused or explained at least something of the abnormal style of play. The local Metros (short for Metropolitanos) have long suffered a reputation as Havana’s “other club” and seemingly always play their games with little appreciable fan following. The Metros are almost an “unofficial” farm club for the more popular Industriales team also housed in the capital city. It has become common practice of late among league officials to reassign promising young players who debut with Metros onto the Industriales roster and thus improve prospects for Havana’s crowd-pleasers. National team outfielders Yasser Gómez and Carlos Tabares are two recent illustrations of such player transfers (which remain quite rare in a league which normally has no trading of ballplayers). Ciego de Avila for its part fares little better when it comes to either fan following or serious runs at National Series league pennants. Since first appearing as a league team in 1978, the club representing one of Cuba’s smallest provinces (population-wise) has boasted only five winning seasons and but one post-season playoff appearance.

The rarified atmosphere coloring this usual game in January 2000 was certainly only enhanced by circumstances of a first season in decades featuring wooden bats. It was thus dou-

bly ironic that on this occasion Cuban batters would awaken in two normally light-hitting lineups with a fireworks display rarely topped even during a heyday of aluminum slugging. And on-field chaos was plausibly amplified almost exponentially by the off-beat locale and related background chaos constantly breaking out in the grandstand itself. In the end such exceptions once more seemed merely to prove a rule concerning the tenacious reign of the unlikely and the unusual that infuses each and every corner of the Cuban national pastime.

Nothing better captured this extraordinary mix of big-time baseball fare with bush-league histrionics than the day’s backdrop comedy in record keeping. With balls already flying out of the park and runners circling the bases in profusion before many had even reached their seats, it soon became apparent that few in attendance had any idea what the game score actually was — though a repetition of blue jerseys racing toward the plate convinced most that visiting Ciego must be comfortably in the lead. The actual score stood at 9–1 after three frames and then 17–2 by the time we reached the halfway mark during the home portion of the fifth. But we had no grasp of these tallies at the time. The crude outfield scoreboard was manned by a dedicated denizen whose attire alone signaled permanent attachment to the institution (a silver drinking cup occasionally flashing reflections from his hip). If he was perhaps better prepared to handle the responsibilities of his post on other occasions, on this high-scoring day he was simply overwhelmed by the higher mathematics. The scoreboard top line (that for the visiting club) first read “2 2 5 2” after four innings, but when gusts of wind temporarily removed the numerical signs from the pegs that had once held them they were quickly replaced with “4 0 6 8” to indicate the Ciego de Avila tally. Hefty wind blasts were soon scattering scoreboard totals landward as freely as they were lifting fly balls skyward. As the score on the field changed rapidly, that on the scoreboard was also subject to even greater and more drastic alterations. The game finally finished, it was truly doubtful that any among even the sanest spectators filing out of the ballpark had the faintest idea of what the final score might actually have been.

One final delightful footnote remains to punctuate the rare afternoon’s fare. It was also during the ongoing scoreboard fiasco that for the very first time in nearly five years of wandering Cuban ballparks I suddenly became conscious of an especially curious feature of Cuban League baseball; and it was one that most other American visitors most likely stumble upon during their very first outing at a ballgame in Havana. Yet it was a trivial treasure that had somehow to date completely escaped my own consciousness. Cuba’s outfield fences are distinctive for their hand-lettered and oversized propaganda slogans praising triumphs of the revolution or spiritual virtues of socialist sport; it was that afternoon in Fajardo Stadium that I first became aware that even a Cuban scoreboard itself gets into the act of celebrating baseball’s proud ties to Fidel Castro’s forty-year communist revolution. The right edge of the scoreboard line score — the part where summary totals are placed and which carries the headings R-H-E in English-speaking North America — naturally reads C-H-E in every

baseball stadium throughout Cuba. (While “Hits” and “Errors” are indicated by their customary English initials, runs scored here becomes “C” for the Spanish *carreras*.) Thus one merely has to glance at a scoreboard in any Cuban ballpark to discover this most permanent reminder of Cuba’s most world-renowned individual revolutionary icon. Che indeed lives!

I was also left with more than Che Guevara’s eerie symbolic presence to fill my thoughts at the end of perhaps my most unusual afternoon spent in a Cuban ballpark. The day’s events had seemingly unfolded in a fashion reminiscent of what could only have been an altogether surreal baseball dream. Could such a game have transpired in Fenway Park or Forbes Field or even in the quaintest Florida or Arizona spring training venue? It was hardly likely and less than imaginable. Despite all surface appearances, this was not a sandlot or rookie league game plucked from some backwater bush league setting. It was a crucial mid-season league contest in a pro-level circuit featuring many athletes and even a few entire teams that were seasoned big-league equivalents. It constituted a typical mini-chapter from the ongoing chronicle of one of the world’s leading baseball stages. This was only business as usual in one of international baseball’s primer center-stage venues.

One had no option but to leave such a scene entirely stunned and thoroughly drained by what had been witnessed. As the collection of no more than a couple hundred visiting fans filed from Manuel Fajardo Stadium, some institutionalized residents remained transfixed at their posts, staring motionless as they had done for the preceding two hours. Some gazed blankly at the field now vacant of both players and action while others faced in an opposite direction as though transfixed by some unseen side show transpiring in the upper regions of the equally sparse grandstand. Their engrossing private movies were apparently still screening behind their vacuous stares. None in this modest throng seemed even vaguely conscious of a more transient crowd that was now melting away from around them.

Tomorrow ballplayers for both Ciego de Avila and Metropolitanos would board cramped, uncomfortable buses for long dusty rides to some other point on the island, where a new home stand or road trip would be launched. The Cuban baseball cycle remains resistant to any encroachments from passing time, and today as yesterday remains entirely unbroken.

* * *

Is there anywhere a land where baseball passions run deeper or where baseball tradition stands more ingrained in the national psyche than it does right here in the United States of America? The answer — perhaps somewhat surprisingly to those raised on the indelible myths of Abner Doubleday, Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson — is a resounding “YES!” on both counts. And that privileged land would most certainly have to be Fidel Castro’s always mysterious island nation of communist Cuba.

Cubans, after all, were playing their own version of the North American national pastime on an organized professional

level as early as 1878, a mere two years after the founding of our own granddaddy National League. The first reported “organized” game occurred on the outskirts of Havana (in the sun-bathed seaport city of Matanzas) during December 1874, but baseball was widely known to exist on Cuban soil as early as 1864. It was the Cubans, furthermore, who transmitted the sport to other outposts of the Caribbean in the late 19th century and who also provided a first few waves of Latin American big league talent during early decades of the 20th century. And of course it has been Cuban teams that have relentlessly dominated a near-half-century of international-level competitions — IBAF world junior and senior championships (the latter today known as the Baseball World Cup), the Intercontinental Cup, the Pan American Games, and finally the Olympic Games — staged since Fidel Castro seized power and thus also since the island’s overnight conversion from professional action to strictly amateur play in the second winter season of the 1960s.

Yet despite the strength of Cuban baseball tradition, the persistent depth of Cuban talent imported by Negro league (Martín Dihigo, Cristóbal Torriente, José Méndez, Alejandro Oms) and major league (Dolf Luque, Minnie Miñoso, Bert Campaneris, Mike Cuéllar, Tony Oliva, Tony Pérez) teams across most of the past century, and the undeniable presence of Cuba’s national teams on the world amateur scene, arguably the most prominent feature of Cuba’s baseball enterprise has nonetheless always remained the relentless mystery that surrounds ball-playing on the oversized island nation. Myth and mystery have indeed long remained the very bywords — perhaps even the very defining elements — of almost every aspect of Cuba’s cherished diamond sport.

Negro league and big league barnstormers visiting the island — from John McGraw’s first forays with his vacationing New York Giants near the turn of the century through the barnstorming heyday of the 1930s and forties — contribute some of winter baseball’s most enduring legends. Cuban baseball pride was first inflamed by the “Black Diamond” José de la Caridad Méndez dominating befuddled big leaguers in 1908 (also 1909–1911) and by firebrand Cristóbal Torriente reputedly outperforming the behemoth Babe Ruth in 1920, even if precise details of these embellished legendary encounters between touring white big leaguers and native island blackball legends would subsequently always frustrate Negro league researchers attempting to amass revealing portraits or verify surviving accounts.

Cuban big league pioneers like Steve Bellán (the first Latin major leaguer when he appeared with the Troy, New York, team of the National Association in 1871), Rafael Almeida and Armando Marsans (the first Latinos to play in the majors during the 20th century when they debuted with Cincinnati in July 1911), pitcher Dolf Luque (a rarely acknowledged pioneering Caribbean star who figured prominently in both the 1919 and 1933 World Series), and the trailblazing Minnie Miñoso (the flamboyant “Cuban Comet” who crossed racial barriers as Chicago’s first black big leaguer) are all remembered more as exotic stereotypes (hot-blood Latinos ex-

hibiting comical broken English and flaming tempers) than as living, breathing genuine ballplayers. Most often these early Cuban stars have been relegated to history's dustbin as quaint exceptions to Latino baseball's trickle of early-twentieth-century "good field, no hit" hackers and rank journeymen.

Luque especially has suffered in the pages of history due to a distorted 1923 on-field incident (one which resulted in his kayoing Casey Stengel in the New York Giants dugout) which has long overshadowed his many pitching milestones: Luque was the first Latin American ballplayer to appear in a World Series, first to win 20 games in a National League season, and first to pace a big league circuit in both ERA and victories. Yet few existing accounts (an exception being my own earlier *Baseball with a Latin Beat* published a decade ago) have accorded Adolfo Luque his due as the first genuine Hispanic big league star, a legendary figure of Cuban League history (as both manager and pitcher), and one of the top pitchers in Cincinnati Reds annals (as owner of the best single season pitching mark in that ball club's rich National League history).

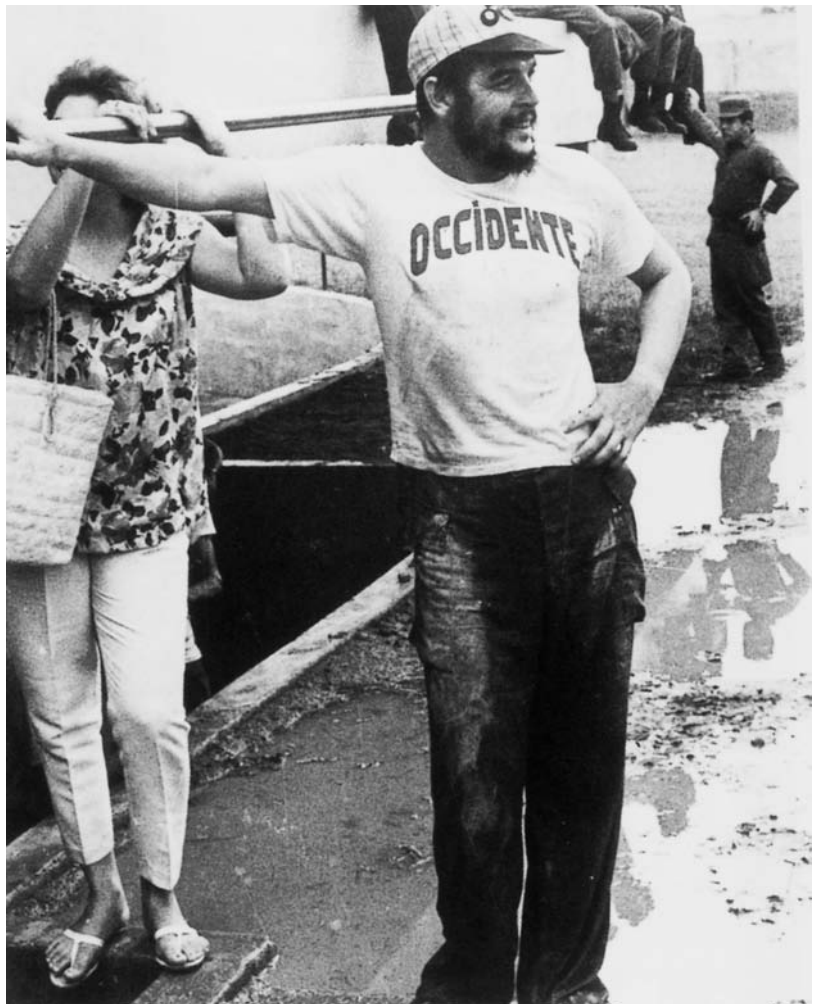
If Luque has rarely received his due, North American fans know almost nothing about four-nation Hall-of-Famer Martín Dihigo, considered by many Negro league researchers to be the best and most versatile blackball performer of all-time. Negro baseball's most renowned historian Robert Peterson (writing in his *Only the Ball Was White* in 1970) once found it necessary to recall that forgotten Negro baseball voices like owner Cum Posey and all-star Buck Leonard had often stressed Dihigo's combined ball-playing talents as never approached by any one man, black or white. Coopers-town enshrinement in 1977 by the major league veterans committee has so far done little to rescue Dihigo's reputation among American enthusiasts who rarely see beyond the horizons of the white man's organized baseball realms. And if Dihigo himself has been unaccountably lost to popular baseball history, other Cuban greats like Méndez, Torriente, Claro Duany, Silvio García and Alejandro Oms remain even today the most shadowy of all the golden-era blackball stars.

The mysteries obscuring Cuban baseball are remarkably even greater when it comes to the second half of the just-closed twentieth century. The chaotic story of the final winters of professional baseball on the island which unfolded in the immediate wake of Fidel Castro's sudden rise to power has never been accurately recounted and is surprisingly for the very first time rehearsed in some detail within this present volume. A wildly popular yet totally groundless myth still persists that Fidel himself was once a promising pitching prospect who had almost been signed by either the New York Giants, Washington Senators or New York Yankees (depending on the particular source of the circulating legend), though this tale is pure hokum, as is revealed with painstaking care in chapters that follow. Yet despite the groundlessness

of the Castro pitching legend, it has doggedly remained for many the best-known Cuban baseball "fact" in current circulation.

It has even been repeated *ad nauseam* that if only 1940s-era Washington Senators super scout Joe Cambria had been more cognizant that some prospects develop slowly and had thus risked inking a hot-prospect named Castro, then perhaps the whole future direction of hemisphere 20th-century politics might have been quite radically altered. The actual facts of Fidel's less-than-mediocre amateur pitching talent have never been properly sorted out by gullible commentators largely because this runaway legend — like so much touching Cuba's mysterious baseball heritage — is far more tantalizing than any bare-bones truths.

North American fans (even rabid followers of Latin American baseball) remain almost entirely in the dark when it comes to details about the numerous individual headliners, organizational structure, and rapid evolution of a hidden Cuban League that has remained the island's sports showcase (aluminum bats, quaint ballparks, neon-lit foul polls, and all) since its inauguration in 1962. Just as American fans of the



Cuba's revolutionary icon Che Guevara stands on muddy dugout steps in 1963, prepared to take part in an exhibition pick-up baseball game.

twenties, thirties and forties missed out on now-resurrected past-era stars like Josh Gibson, Oscar Charleston, Satchel Paige and an array of other crack black leaguers forced into the shadows by baseball's institutionalized racism, so too have more recent generations of rooters missed witnessing Muñoz, Marquetti, Vinent, Linares, Pacheco, Urrutia and dozens more buried in Cuba by the specter of America's Cold War politics. Some of these missing Cubans from the past thirty or forty years may well have qualified as Cooperstown legends; many more were likely legitimate big-league all-stars.

And the most recent small flood of Cuban defectors — Rey Ordóñez (Mets), Ariel Prieto (A's), Osvaldo Fernández (Giants), René Arocha (Cardinals), Rolando Arrojo (Devil Rays, Red Sox), Liván Hernández (Marlins, Expos), Orlando "El Duque" Hernández and José Contreras (Yankees, White Sox) and Danys Báez (Indians, Devil Rays)— have fostered the growing notion that current Cuban baseball is indeed a hidden potential pipeline of unlimited and untested big league talent which is now again about to explode upon the big league scene. Such speculation is fueled in the main by serious miscalculation of what in reality today's Cuban League actually is, and by sparse accurate scouting data available on even the top Cuban stars.

Impressive 1992 Barcelona and 1996 Atlanta gold medal performances by such muscle-bound Cuban sluggers as Omar Linares and Orestes Kindelán, such acrobatic middle infielders as Germán Mesa and Eduardo Paret, such talented flychasers as Yasser Gómez, Luis Ulacia and Osmani Urrutia, and such dominating hurlers as Omar Ajete, Maels Rodríguez and Pedro Luis Laso, have only further enhanced a popular notion of Cuban baseball as a veritable gold mine of seemingly uncollectible professional talent.

In truth the Cuban League appeared to fall on hard times during recent winters near the end of the 20th century, due perhaps to a large confluence of related factors. These factors seemingly included long isolation from modern coaching innovations; some questionable policies by Cuban League officials involving suspensions of top players charged with tainted loyalty (those perceived as threats to defect); shipping

of prospects to amateur and semi-professional leagues in Italy, Colombia, Nicaragua and Japan; and the subsequent disappointment of die-hard Cuban fans (especially those in Havana) in response to this dissolution of the league's overall level of talent.

The past nine winters (1998–2006) have nonetheless witnessed a rather considerable rebounding of fan interest and thus of renewed excitement surrounding Cuban League seasons. Central to the revival have been spirited overall league play, a number of record-busting performances (José Ibar's 20 pitching wins in 1998, Maels Rodríguez's 263 strikeouts in 2001, and Osmani Urrutia's remarkable string of .400-plus batting topping the list), a lengthened Cuban League schedule (to 90 games), a renewed mid-season All-Star Game and revised format for the summertime second season (now called the Super League), further heights achieved by the national team in international play (especially the triumph over the big-league Baltimore Orioles and also a more recent "trifecta" of World Cup victories in Taipei, Havana and Rotterdam), and welcomed news concerning reversals in Cuban League policies regarding exporting of some stars and the suspensions of others. The ultimate peak, of course, would arrive with the amazing title-game run achieved during an inaugural MLB World Baseball Classic last March. Cuban baseball thus remains, as always, an unrivaled hotbed of regularly regenerating talent and an almost idyllic scene for American fans soured by stateside professional baseball's current rash of steroid scandals, cheapened slugging records, and ongoing debilitating over-commercialization.

But where did these glories of Cuba's national pastime come from, how did they emerge and evolve, and what accounts for their unrivalled uniqueness? It is a complex tale indeed, and one needing a far more balanced treatment than anywhere earlier attempted. So let the remarkable saga — of Cuban diamond legends both heralded and obscure, of a panoply of professional and amateur leagues that have filled nearly a century and a half, and of the indelible legacy that has only expanded under the manipulations of Fidel Castro's fifty-year communist experiment — now finally begin to unfold.