

THE UTILITY PLAYER: AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF BASEBALL IN
CUBAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT:

In this thesis, I will address the role of baseball in Cuba from 1898-2016. I split the thesis into three distinct time periods: Country inception (1898-1953), Revolution (1953-1989), Special Period (1989-2016). Each of these times periods represents a historically significant shift in the political history of Cuba. Every chapter seeks to define the role and significance of baseball in that time period. Through the use of newspapers, magazines, and speeches, I analyze the importance of baseball in society. Additionally, I include information from notable historians to provide contextual information. Cuban baseball served as a form of connection for the sharing of ideas between the US in the early 20th century. It served as a symbol of industrialization and the political and economic advancements that occur. During the revolutionary period, baseball served as a way to legitimize the Revolutionary Government. In transition to the Special Period baseball became a symbol that holds the Cuban nation together. Through economic and political struggles baseball remained a support system. In the end, I found that baseball plays a contributory role in Cuban Society from 1898 to 2016.

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Introduction

“Before the republic, there was baseball. After the revolution, there was baseball. And during tall the years in between – there was baseball.”

-Milton Jamail¹

Every country searches for an identity that makes it unique from others, but identity is not always easily defined. At times, it is a culmination of various elements of society that provides a clear explanation for what it means to have pride for one’s country. Cuba serves as a perfect example for a nation striving to find an identity. Cubans searched for something that created a distinction between them and their colonial rulers, Spain. As a result, they were pulled closer in line with the United States. In 1953, Fidel Castro used national identity as a major tool in his revolution and the trend continued into the post-revolution period. Lastly, Cubans sought something to bring them together during the Special Period when they had nothing and needed a glimmer of hope. In all of these times, baseball acted as unifier, underlying the grand political movements. Baseball provided people with an emotional connection with Cuba and made them feel Cuban.

Since the inception of the country, Cubans have faced various situations that forced them to question their nationalism, their sense of belonging to a greater community. Each time they faced a new challenge, Cubans reconfigured what it meant to be Cuban at that specific moment. Nationalism served as the foundation for defining what

¹ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 77.

it meant to be Cubans because they lacked a consistent political or economic system. In turn, social elements, for example sports and music, became the leading factors in the challenge to define what it means to be Cuban. There are various components that contribute to being Cuban. One of the prominent factors that continually stand out throughout the history of the island is baseball. Baseball plays an important role in the independence movement, revolution, and Cuba today. Many other countries within this region were not as deeply entrenched in the baseball world during the late 19th century as Cuba. As a result of its prevalence, baseball continues to play a transformative role in Cuba and its influence is not limited by political or economic factors.

The importance of baseball for Cuba is unprecedented in other nations; it acts as a unifier for this country. Cuba is unlike other countries in the region, since many of these other countries prefer soccer. From 1898 to 2016, the nation of Cuba made drastic changes. The one consistent factor over the entire time is baseball. While the country around baseball changes, baseball continues to find a way to remain an intricate part of daily life in Cuba, from the lower class to upper class to government officials. The question then becomes what role does baseball play? How does it constantly change and remain relevant in society, what allows it to take a foothold in Cuba, but not in other nations? Ultimately, what makes baseball Cuban and what makes Cubans go insane for baseball?

From 1898 to present day, baseball contributes to the Cuban culture. At the inception of the country, baseball served as a distinguishing factor. As examined in Chapter one, Baseball allowed a unique relationship between the US and Cuba to develop beyond the typical political and economic boundaries. Baseball flourished and served as a

cultural connector beyond the industrialization and political and economic advancements that occurred in the first fifty years of the 20th century. Chapter two examines the way in which Fidel Castro transformed and employed baseball as a mechanism of his revolution. During the revolution period baseball becomes Cuban with Castro's restriction on the professionalism of sports. Transitioning into the later part of the 20th century the Special Period presented Cuba with mounting difficulties politically, economically, and socially. Baseball contributed to society when people had nothing and served as a way for the government to gain revenue throughout a difficult period. The third chapter of this work examines the contributions baseball made during the Special Period and the effects it had on the emerging relationship with the United States. In short, over the course of the century baseball continually maintained connections between the greater community despite social and political upheavals.

Literature Review

Within the last fifty years, sports have played an increasingly important role in the understanding of national identity. Scholars have begun to examine the ways in which sports proves to be a unifier for many nations. The expansion of this idea ranges from sports playing an almost insignificant role in national identity to being one of the main contributing factors to "patria." (Nationhood). By creating a sense of nationhood, the people develop connections with one another aside from any political and social challenges that plague a country. Historian Eric Hobsbawm states, "the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people."² He is directly referring to Europeans and their relation with soccer. "Belonging to" a nation is

² Gregg Bocketti, "Sports Culture and the Varieties of Latin American Identity," *Latin American Research Review* 52, (2017) pp. 157-163. doi: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.93>.

easily seen with jerseys and key people who represent that idea. Another historian Antonio Sotomayor describes the relation between nation and sport as a “ need to see the nation performed.”³ Sports demonstrate the true spirit, emotional connectivity, when a nation performs, or plays, in competitions. The outward display of nationalism that is enhanced through sports activities is the central element of Sotomayor’s understanding. Typically, for many people sports are an area without severe controversy; the disagreements are about different teams rather than politics and economic downfalls.

Alternatively, Pablo Albarces believes that sports are “cultural machine... a producer of national narratives.”⁴ He is arguing that the sports narrative is the backing power to the entire national narrative. The sports narrative creates a sense of national pride. For example, Eduardo Archetti highlights the role that sports play when defining masculinity in a society. He focuses on elements of sport that foster relationships between fathers and sons along with the distinction it creates between men and women from an intellectual and societal perspective.⁵

The development of national identity in Cuba, the role of baseball, intrigues historians. For Louis Pérez he specifically examines the role that baseball plays in the national identity narrative. He investigates how baseball influences Cuban society and people, while not solely limiting it to one faction of society: “Baseball captures the Cuban imagination early and permanently: as a sport, as a state of mind, as a statement –

³ Ibid., 160

⁴ Ibid., 161

⁵ Joseph L. Arbena, "Meaning And Joy In Latin American Sports." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 35, no. 1 (2000): 83-91.

sometimes as all three at once.”⁶ Continuing in the same article he states, “ In fact, baseball has long served to give expression to Cuban nationality, both as a means to nationhood and as a metaphor for nation.”⁷ In one article he also cites José Sixto de Sola who said: “Athletic sport was one of the factors that made Cubans feel free and obtain their liberty.”⁸ Sport, particularly baseball, enabled Cubans to imagine liberty, from independence movement to the revolution. Perez illustrates the connection between baseball and nationalism in Cuba, while simultaneously offering different perspectives for the connections that exist between the two. In another work, Pérez provides an answer to the question, why baseball: “Baseball offers the possibility of national integration of all Cubans, of all classes, black and white, young and old, men and women.”⁹ Assuring the distinction between each of these groups illuminates the strengths of baseball because baseball surpasses the typical factors that divide nations. Milton Jamail asserts similar ideas to Pérez and agrees that baseball plays a key role in the national identity narrative. “It is difficult to find a family in Cuba that not include a member who loves baseball.”¹⁰ Jamail claims that baseball plays a key role not only in culture and connecting baseball and national identity, but in all elements of society. Baseball is deeply entrenched within all aspects of Cuban society and through out his work this idea is illustrated. Each of these historians examines the relationship between society and sport. Perez and Eric Hobsbawm focused on the way sport fits into the

⁶ Louis A. Perez, “Between Baseball and Bullfighting: The Quest for Nationality in Cuba 1868-1898,” *The Journal of American History* 81, No. 2 (September, 1994), pp. 493-551, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2081169?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States:Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 8.

preexisting society. While Milton Jamail examined how society fit into the baseball narrative. In each perspective, the two components develop an intertwined relationship that allows sports to become a transformative faction of society.

Chapter 1

Cuban Baseball and The United States

1898-1953

“Cuban baseball was writing its history with a view towards establishing the sport as part of the foundation of the nation.”

- Roberto González Echevarría¹¹

Background

Cuba officially became a country in 1898 after war with Spain. In this moment it was burdened by the weight of its neighbor to the North. The United States worked in conjunction with Cubans in order to help them gain independence. The Teller Agreement ensured that the United States would not be able to annex Cuba, but simply be there to assist Cuba during the war and then the United States, intended to remove all troops from the island. As a result, Cuba would feel the influence of the United States for years to come. The United States remained in control of Cuba until 1902 when the United States, “formally inaugurating the Cuban republic.”¹² Even though, the United States had formally acknowledge Cuba as an independent country they still continued to intervene in the politics of the island and play an important role in Cuban Society.

¹¹ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.

¹² Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs, "Chronology of U.S.-Cuba Relations", Cuban Research Institute. Accessed December 04, 2017. <https://cri.fiu.edu/us-cuba/chronology-of-us-cuba-relations/>.

The United States influence began, prior to the beginning of the Cuban War for Independence, most notably with the inception of baseball on the island. In the 1860s, two Cuban college students returned from Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama. At the time, these two students would never know the true effect they would have on Cuba. Cuba experience the first baseball ban issued from Spain, in 1869, during the outbreak of the first war between Cuba and Spain, the Ten Years War. Upon the conclusion of this war, the Cuban League was officially born and remains a staple to this day. During the few years prior and during the Spanish-American War, baseball became extremely popular for two reasons. One, the distaste the Spanish had for the game, and secondly the connection baseball gave Cuba to the United States. Historian Louis Perez in his book, *On Becoming Cuban*, states “Baseball in nineteenth-century Cuba presented one means of taking the measure of colonial society in transition- baseball as an expression of change and as agent of change.”¹³ Baseball functioned in a new country because it allowed Cubans to have a tradition independent of Spain. The game of baseball contributed to the Cuban spirit through the war and into independence.

At the beginning of the new country, Cuba, the United States remained in control of the island and aided with the process of development of various sectors, necessities for countries to exist. The United States attempted to begin the process of development for an island that lacked the level of industrialization as the United States due to the preexisting colonial relationship with Spain. The economic sector of Cuba benefited from the industrialization brought to the island by the United States. The desire for political, economic, and social advancements contributed to the development of baseball during the

¹³ Louis A. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 78.

early twentieth century. The United States influence was seen in the game of baseball, the structure and success of leagues, newspapers, and much more.

Baseball On The Island

The love of baseball preceded the independence movement. Not long after baseball came the island, the Ernesto brothers developed a baseball team, The Havana Baseball Club, in 1872. While The Havana Baseball Club was the original baseball club, baseball existed well beforehand. Previously, the Spanish Crown banned baseball, because the Spanish Crown saw baseball as a definite against their sport of bullfighting. When the Spanish banned baseball it pushed Cuba further towards independence. During the second attempt for independence, the Spanish-American War, the Cuban people needed a distinguishing factor to separate their culture from the one forced upon them by Spain. Louis Pérez addressed the distancing factor, baseball, when he says: “Cubans were in search of new forms to express discontent, new ways to draw differences between themselves as a people apart and a nation distinct from Spain.”¹⁴ One of the forms of discontent and distinction the Cuban people chose was baseball. Baseball served as the functioning power to completely eliminate the Spanish sport of choice, bullfighting. “Baseball in the nineteenth century Cuba presented one means of taking the measure of colonial society in transition-baseball as an expression of change and as agent of change.”¹⁵ At the time, baseball made its first statement as an agent of society. Rather than simply being a game, it became a contributing factor in a wartime society that needed an escape. The role that baseball plays at the time of the independence movement

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁵ Ibid., 78.

is the first example of its contribution to society, and over the next one hundred years, baseball will contribute to aid in Cuban society.

The desire to create a diaspora between the Spanish Cuba and the free Cuba fueled the interest in the game. The United States showed commitment and their influence contributed greatly to the success of Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Not only were they supporting the war through manpower and funding, they played an intricate role in the first few years of Cuba. Roberto González Echevarría addressed the American influence, and how baseball connected the United States and Cuba while at the same time distancing Cuba from Spain: “Baseball was a sport played in defiance of Spanish authorities, who viewed this American invention as vaguely secessionist and dangerously violent because of the use of sticks.”¹⁶ One major distinction made the transition from bullfighting to baseball, and in the end baseball replaced bullfighting.¹⁷

From there, beginning in 1898 baseball became the source for the United States and Cuba to be on a level playing field; while simultaneously serving the Cuban people in their process of discovering what it means to be Cuban. The United States perceived that they played a major role in the creation of the free country of Cuba and as a result of this perception they did not immediately relinquish power in Cuba. They remained in Cuba until 1909. In order to help sustain a country that could fend for itself, they attempted to help Cuba develop political, social and economic order, “After 1898, United States officials came to see baseball as a potential instrument of political order and social

¹⁶ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.

¹⁷ Louis A. Perez, “Between Baseball and Bullfighting: The Quest for Nationality in Cuba 1868-1898,” *The Journal of American History* 81, No. 2 (September, 1994), pp. 493-551, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2081169?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

control.”¹⁸ Baseball created a social link that allowed the United States control without having to take it forcefully. While Cubans shared the game of baseball with the United States, they did not intend for it to perform and contribute to society in the same manner:

*“ They (Cubans) could derive from baseball what they needed and discard the rest, that the meanings, values, and symbols ascribed to baseball could be radically different in a Cuban context than in a North American one, and they could serve Cuban needs as defined by Cubans. ”*¹⁹

Baseball contributed to all classes with in Cuba, and the structure of the league illustrated how this was a reality. Moving forward from these two initial ideas, it is important to understand the structure of Cuban baseball. There is not, simply, a professional league with a farm system below to continually feed players into the major leagues. During the first fifty years of the 20th century, four distinct categories existed: the professional game, semi-pro baseball, sugar mill baseball, and amateur baseball. The professional game mainly existed in Havana, but not exclusively. The semi-professional league received funding from companies, and were much more inclusive than the professional counterparts. Sugar mill baseball extended from the sugar production industry. These were teams that formed from the employees of sugar mills and existed in the areas around the mills all over the island. The social clubs in Havana sponsored the amateur leagues, and importantly, these clubs excluded blacks from playing for them.²⁰

Four distinct sections exist in Cuban baseball, but records and details regarding each of their individual structure do not exist. Specifically, sugar mill baseball records

¹⁸ Ibid., 517.

¹⁹ Ibid., 517.

²⁰ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001),115.

are practically non-existent. Enough evidence exists to show sugar mill baseball once existed, but the lack of evidence proves detrimental when attempting to determine the leagues influence on society. Semi-pro baseball functioned similar to the other sections, and semi-pro baseball does play an important role in society: it falls in the shadows of the professional league and amateur league. A key social scientist of the region, Milton Jamail, notes his struggles with tracking and remaining up to date on Cuban baseball, “What surprised me though, as I immersed myself in the island’s baseball culture, was that keeping up with Cuban Baseball isn’t always easy either.”²¹ While Jamail is directly referring to his specific time spent during the eighties and nineties in Cuba, the records of baseball on the island are difficult to come across.

The amateur league and the professional league, the Cuban league, formed the two types of baseball where some evidence of record keeping exists. These two leagues, created a unique relationship within the baseball community, and faced off with one another during the first part of the 20th century.²² The lack of records and communication regarding baseball on the island shows the lack of development between leagues across the island during the early 20th century. By the mid 1920s baseball became much more documented. The professional league and the amateur league were heavily recorded, due to the central location on the island, the center of the industrialization on the island. Even with the lack of evidence, the country was enamored by baseball, and even though baseball was influenced by Cuba’s northern counterparts, baseball in Cuba had a flare of its own.

²¹ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 48.

²² Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.

The Early Professional League

The Cuban League, professional baseball, began in 1878 with three teams: Almendares, Havana, and Matanzas. All of these teams were centrally located within and around the capital city of Havana. The importance of baseball to Havana can be seen in the way they marketed Havana to others outside of Cuba. The city, Havana, mentioned baseball in the list of city attraction in tourist brochure in the early 1890s.²³ Throughout the first fifty years of the 20th century, teams fluctuated in and out of the Cuban League. Typically, the third team played the role of a rotating element, while Almendares and Havana remained constant. A growth in teams, three to five teams, occurred from 1900 to 1906.²⁴ The constant transition of the Cuba League plagued the development of professional baseball throughout the early part of the century. Even with the geographic spread of teams across the island, prominent newspapers covered Cuban baseball. In 1901 till 1920 *Diario de la Mariana*, the professional league in Cuba appeared almost everyday between November and February. The newspapers covered the scores and the upcoming games. The mention of baseball, in daily newspapers, is common in the years that follow. Two other highly renowned newspapers, *La Lucha* and *El Mundo*, reported the scores and upcoming situations of the Cuban professional league. Specifically, it touched on the upcoming championships. Interestingly, the teams in the Cuban League called Havana their home, when it came to ballparks, but these newspapers were for the

²³ Ibid., 97.

²⁴ Ibid., 122.

entire country. The growth of teams around Havana did not represent the interest across the island.²⁵

An important element, regarding the role that baseball played during the early 20th century, was the influence and collaboration with the United States. Following the Spanish-American War and the United States occupation, baseball culture in the two nations became completely intermingled. While the connection with the United States expanded far beyond the baseball diamond, the interconnectivity is shown through the game of baseball. One of the major examples of the importance of United States baseball in Cuba was the newspaper report in Cuba. Every newspaper previously mentioned documented the regular and postseason of Major League Baseball in the United States. The baseball season in Cuba was built to fit in the off- season of Major League Baseball. The cycle of newspaper reporting shows the influence of United States baseball. During March or April until October, there was virtually no mention of Cuban League, players or teams; the entire reports were schedules and stats of major league baseball teams. The articles during the major league season were typically similar in length to the Cuban League ones, but contained more statistics about players and games. The similarities of these articles demonstrate the interconnectivity between the US's major league and Cuba's baseball league that exist as a result of the industrialization of Cuba.

Along with the documentation of the team, the players that came from the Major Leagues replicated American customs and ideas. Without the Cuban League, the transfer of ideas potentially would not have occurred in some social sectors. While in Cuba,

²⁵ World News Paper Archive. Advertisement. World Newspaper Archive. Accessed October 4, 2017. <https://newspaperarchive.com/>.

American players acted differently than within the United States. These actions illustrated the illusive grandeur of Cuba. Americans saw Cuba as a place full of gambling, girls, and booze.²⁶ Baseball served as a way for Cubans to examine Americans in their country, and also provided a pathway for many players to make it to America. While there, they were capable of examining these features one-on-one. The inclusion of American baseball players in Cuban baseball created the foundation for the recruitment of Cuban players to the MLB. The inclusion was not important from the standpoint of Cubans recruiting others, but for Major League baseball teams recruiting Cubans. This inclusion marked the first influence of Cuban baseball on an international stage. Milton Jamail, points out the international element when he says, “For the baseball industry, Cuba represents the most important frontier in the increasingly important global search for players.”²⁷ Individuals from all over would come to discover the wonder of Cuban baseball. It gave Cubans an opportunity to go to America and it gave Cuba a way to learn more from America.

Even with all of the factors listed above, the Cuban League was not a powerhouse for Cuban baseball during this time. It did not expand, but rather remained consistent with anywhere from three to five teams. Although there was a “furor” for baseball in Havana, baseball served a strong purpose in politics and the economy based on the intertwined relationship with the United States.²⁸ The *Pride of Havana* author commented on the views of the professional league during 1930s and 1940s, “The Cuban League’s

²⁶ Louis A. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999)

²⁷ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 2.

²⁸ Roberto González Echevarría *The pride of Havana: a history of Cuban baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 93.

disarray was considered a national disgrace.”²⁹ Although it was not all bad, in the late 1930s and 1940s the Cuban League began to capitalize on “the emergence of players, mostly pitchers, from the provinces.”³⁰ The Cuban League began to represent all of Cuba. The integration of people from all over the island exemplifies the way the Cuban League was Cuban, but also the professional league deeply entrenched relationship with the United States.

The Amateur League

The Amateur League mainly existed in Havana and spread into the surrounding provinces. The Amateur League helped to distinguish baseball as something Cuban. The development of these Amateur leagues were in communities within social clubs. While they covered the same geographical area as the professional league, the amateur league remained the home of sports for the elite.

Baseball existed outside of the captain of Havana and this spread of baseball helped to bring baseball outside of the typical industrialized city. Roberto González Echevarría touched on the existence of baseball outside of Havana: “The borderline region where baseball thrived was neither totally urban nor entirely rural but a combination.”³¹ The regions that the author discussed provides an example of the influence of the United States on Cuba. The spread of baseball across the island helped to illustrate the influence of the US. The growth of the amateur league spread from about 1914-1920s. Within the six-year span, a documented number of teams developed and showed the importance of the amateur league. In 1914 the amateur league was founded

²⁹ Ibid., 272.

³⁰ Ibid., 220.

³¹ Ibid., 94.

with four teams: Vedado Tennis Club, Instituto de la Habana, Sociedad de Mariano, Club Athletico de Cuba, along with teams that came from the province close to Havana.³² The league expanded again in 1919 by adding another five teams and another 2 teams in 1920.³³ All of these teams were located near Havana, but were not exclusively limited to central Havana. The major distinction between these two leagues showed the difference between private versus public: “The amateur game, which was the origin of it all remained a sport played among private, exclusive social clubs.”³⁴ In 1910 *El Figaro*, a Cuban newspaper, discussed the atmosphere of amateur baseball on the island, and the overpowering enthusiasm on the island.³⁵ The exclusiveness of the amateur league showed that while baseball was popular, there still existed a distinction between classes. The amateur league served to show the importance of baseball to the elites.

Sugarmill Leagues

The Sugarmill Leagues typically developed in the towns that surrounded the sugar plantation, the more rural areas of the island where the plantations were located. With the influence of the United States technology, the distance between the eastern region of the island and the city of Havana no longer seemed so far away. The Sugarmill League, *ligas azucareras*, existed in the Las Villas (central) all the way to Oriente (east).³⁶ Historian Roberto Echevarría described the Sugarmill league and the economy that propelled the Sugarmill League: “During this period, Sugarmill produced both sugar and baseball players in record quantities, owners and entrepreneurs had money to pay

³² Paula J. Pettavino, *Sport in Cuba* (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh, 1994), 38.

³³ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 188.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

top-notch performers, and ordinary Cubans had cash to buy tickets to see them.”³⁷ The Sugarmill teams thrived well into the early 1950s. The economy was booming with the result of modern technology that helped to produce more sugar and transport sugar more effectively. Baseball spread throughout the island because of the industrialization promoted baseball on the island, but also helped baseball become Cuban.

The Transition of the Leagues

The leagues continued to grow and transition throughout the 19th century and such growth allowed the relationship with the United States to further develop. The quality of sugarmill baseball competed with that of the semi-professional. Moving into the 1930s and 1940s the three baseball leagues remained separate, but the gap between them began to close, “ The lines dividing amateur, sugarmill, and semipro baseball³⁸ were not sharply drawn.”³⁹ Prior to the 1930s and 1940s it is important to understand the different roles that the leagues played. The sugarmill and semi-pro league served as a place for Cubans to play almost exclusively except for Americans from the Negro league, but in many ways these two leagues were Cuban. Their inclusive nature and the spirit and comradery of these leagues proved to be more Cuban than anyone expected. Railroads connected the towns of these sugarmills that distances previously separated. The amateur league served

³⁷ Ibid., 139.

While the Sugarmill Leagues served the largest spread of people on the island, it is difficult to examine the interworking of the leagues because no record of them exist. It is believed by historians that the Sugarmill records were confiscated during the revolutionary period and were never seen again.

³⁸ Although, this is not explicitly mentioned with a section. Semi-pro baseball is an important factor to Cuban baseball, but serves similar functions to the other three elements of baseball. The evidence for the semi-pro league did not provide neat records either.

³⁹ Ibid.,152.

as a place for the wealthy to have their baseball. In many ways, the amateur league was a purely Cuban league as well. The professional league was another story. It had its fair share of Cuban players, but also was the main place for American players to play in Cuba. As a result of this, the author of *The Pride of Havana*, addressed the situation with the professional league by saying:

In the first third of the twentieth century Cuba baseball, particularly the professional kind, was deeply affected by the close political, economic and cultural relations between the island and The United States (close is something of a misnomer, since the politics and business of the United States and Cuba were sometimes really one and the same).⁴⁰

The late 1890s until the early 1930s is known as the golden age of baseball. Baseball was a common factor that helped to unite the United States and Cuba. During the 1940s and the early 1950s the true value of baseball in Cuba revealed itself. Even though baseball served as an agent to the relations with the United States and helped to link Cuba to the US, it had found its way into all levels of Cuban society. The United States helped to spread baseball across the island further during the 1940s and 1950s. The radio helped to spread baseball and the obsession that came with it: “An immediate Cuban ‘imagined community became manifest, as never before in the voice of broadcasters...’⁴¹ Baseball became an integral part of the Cuban identity. The relationship between Cuba and the United States remained intertwined and the influence of the United States can be seen through many aspects of Cuban culture, especially baseball.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁴¹ Ibid., 279.

What it Means to Be Cuban

The influence of Spanish culture quickly disappeared and replaced by the culture of the independence movement. At the moment the question of the nation of Cuba came to the forefront. One of the major pushbacks against the Spanish government was baseball, and to some, the use of baseball as opposition to the Spanish crown is the beginning of Cuban national identity. The beginning of the country and the United States influence led to the entanglement of Cuba and the United States, but the Cuban national identity found its own place. Cubans sought to distinguish themselves from Spain and the United States provided the perfect opposition. Between Cuba and the United States, baseball served as a common ground; baseball was something that was important to everyone of every social class, color, and gender. More importantly sports, specifically baseball in this case, “offered the basis on which to stake a claim to membership in the community of civilized nations of the world.”⁴²

The reason many consider baseball to be a pivotal part of national identity is because of the many purposes it serves in society. Baseball is not limited to culture. It is culture, politics, economics, morals, a unifier, and so much more. Politically and economically, baseball served to connected the United States through a meeting ground for state negotiations to the economic profit Cuba received as a result of baseball related visitors. Cubans at the time were searching for meaning, a feeling of Cuba, and as Louis Perez puts it in his book, *On Becoming Cuban*: “They sought to define nationality through forms that were most immediately available, one of which happened to be

⁴² Louis A. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) 273.

baseball.”⁴³ What made baseball appealing to many on the island was the inclusion mechanism that baseball had to offer. Cuba, a changing society, needed to find ways to become a nation for all of its peoples, “Baseball offered the possibility of national integration of all Cubans of all classes, black and white, young and old, men and women.”⁴⁴ By unifying all people, the country could move forward and become a sustainable place.

The United States and Cuban Identity

As with any part of the early 20th century, the United States played a major contributing role to the construction of Cuban national identity. Baseball served as a catalyst for these desires and became the translator between these two societies. The presence of the United States shone through in business designs, product marketing and selling, people even began to desire to learn English. Historian Louis Perez illustrated the source of what became Cuban national identity as linked to the US: “Much of what passed for Cuban, and from which national identity was derived after 1898 was drawn from an environment dominated by North American cultural forms.”⁴⁵ Continuing until the mid 1940s the American way was what some Cubans sought after. They wanted more than anything to be American.

But, the control of the United States could only go so far, until a country that wanted its own place in the world would realize that they were not actually on their own. Even though the United States had handed over Cuba to its government in the early

⁴³ Ibid., 80

⁴⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 142.

1900s, their constant hand in everything began to present an issue in Cuba. At this time, baseball was caught in the cross hairs of the United States and Cuban relations.

The complicated relationship between Cuba and the United States led to many questions on how these relations would continue in the future. Whether people viewed Cuba as an independent country or one barely clinging on even with the assistance of the United States, Cuba sustained a place in the world and issues arose for Cuba as a result of this fact, but Cuba will find its own way. The issues that existed between Cuba and the United States are derived from their differing views during the first fifty years of the 20th century.⁴⁶ The divide that was created would become the underlying factor for years to come.

Brink of Revolution

Cubans profited from the United States while baseball flourished. They benefitted from the technological advances brought from the United States. The connection between Cuban baseball and Major League baseball was well established and flourished. A Cuban team had even become a part of the minor league system. Cuba sought the path of a new leader, Fidel Castro, and with this choice the United States and Cuban relations would change forever. What is important to remember going forward with Cuban national identity is that

[n]ational identity constantly adjusts to and reconciles perceptions of reality with changing needs, and vice versa, with its own particular history, specifically a way

⁴⁶ Ibid., 78.

*to experience the meaning of inclusion of previously disparate constitutes within the notion of nationality.*⁴⁷

While the structure of Cuba looked differently going into the revolution period, the technological changes by the United States remained and at the end of it all baseball expanded its popularity beyond the elites.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

Chapter 2

The Revolution and Baseball

1953-1989

“El mejor beisbol amareo de mundo! El mejor espectataculo deportivo!”

“The best amateur baseball in the world! The best sport spectacle!”

-Thomas F. Carter⁴⁸

Revolution Context

The revolution attempted to use baseball to defend their ideologies and values. The initial actions of the Cuban Revolution began in 1953; the events that occurred over the next six years shaped Cuba, and ultimately Cuban baseball, into what it is today. The actions that occurred from 1953 until 1959 provide a link between what Cuba was and what Cuba became. Although many researchers do not deal with the sports context during the "revolutionary" period, the significance of the political events provides an introduction to what later became baseball in Cuba. Baseball provided domestic and international legitimacy to the Cuban revolutionary project.

Beginning in 1952, Fidel Castro started to develop the plans for a non-peaceful end to the Batista regime. Batista's government, like many before it, faced disapproval

⁴⁸ Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Duke University Press, 2008), 73.

due to the corrupt nature of the state itself. The dissatisfaction became the driving force for Fidel Castro, and in 1953 decided on the first official target, Moncada military barracks. So, on July 26th, 1953 Castro and his men attacked the Moncada barracks. They were defeated, and the few that could escape sought refuge in the mountains along the eastern side of the island. Later the same year, 1953, Castro along with eight of his counterparts were tried in court and sentenced to prison.⁴⁹ For Castro, 1954 and much of 1955 he sat in a prison cell lacking the freedom to continue to plan his revolution. While he did not idly during his time in prison, the revolutionary planning lagged. In May of 1955, Castro regained his freedom due to Batista freeing all political prisoners. In turn, he would spend the next year in Mexico planning his return and ultimately his revolution. Castro officially moved from revolutionary planning to action in November of 1956. His remarkable return, along with forces, to Cuba began on November 25th in a boat named the *Granma*. The group made landfall in Oriente Province on December 2nd; they were attacked and eventually found their way into nearby mountains, Sierra Maestra Mountains. Castro and the few men still alive spent much of the early part of 1957 in a game of cat and mouse with the Cuban military.

Many in Cuba believed that Fidel Castro died on December 3rd, but they soon learned of his survival. An article published in the New York Time not only proved Fidel was alive and well, but it also fostered a sense of public support for Castro and his rebels. The popularity of Castro and his Rebels expanded further than the Cuban bordered, specifically into "that country up north" the US; the perception of Batista in the United

⁴⁹ Evan K. Nagel "Beyond the Sports Page: Baseball, The Cuban Revolution, and Rochester, New York Newspapers, 1954-1960" Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. (2014), <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/2564>. 58.
Peter C. Bjarkman, *History of Cuban Baseball*, (McFarland, 2014)

States shifted substantially at the same time. Following the shift in support in early 1957 Castro and his rebels spent much of 1957 combatting against Batista forces, with much success. While in 1957 the public opinion shifted against Batista, in 1958 the United States government continued to fund the Batista regime. Batista, through his continual actions, created a significant situation for the United States. In March, he discontinued the right to freedom of the press by suspended constitutional rights. A clash with the rebel forces in April, fed into the public relations crisis that already existed. Castro and his rebels, M-26-7, and the National Police fought, and the National Police brutally killed many of the M-26-7 fighters. The actions of the police led to further criticism of the Batista regime. Between April and November of 1958, the rebel forces continued to gain ground in Cuba, and by November they controlled a majority of the battles while simultaneously holding public support. The winner of the election, which occurred in 1959, showed the corrupt nature of the government even more; Batista handpicked his predecessor. The United States officially removed their support of Batista in late 1958. The last few months of 1958 Castro's forces captured essential cities and weighed more substantial and more cumbersome on Batista's forces. The final day of 1958, Batista fled the country with no plans to ever return to Cuba. On January 8th, 1959 Fidel Castro and troops arrived in Cuba. The capital was theirs, more importantly, Cuba was theirs.⁵⁰

Beginning in 1960, Fidel controlled Cuba. He spent the next two years making the Cuban government his own. The first few months Castro sought to eliminate the Batista supporters that still called Cuba home. He began with reforms and many of the actions he took following the revolution provided insight into the future inclusion of communism.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 58

He spent from April to July traveling as the new face of Cuba. During the middle to later part of the year, the Cuban-US relationship began to fragment. President Eisenhower pushed for the CIA to wage attacks against the Castro Regime. The actions that occurred in 1960 lay the foundation for the implosion of the relationship between Cuba and the US. Beginning in early 1960 Castro aligned himself with the Soviet Union by signing a trade agreement, later that year Castro seized the oil refineries. The US retaliated by only allowing about 5% of sugar, which is in the US economy, to come from Cuba. Eventually, the Revolutionary Government nationalized oil, electricity, and sugar. Fidel Castro drew a line in the sand with the United States marking the end of relations and simultaneously the beginning of a new Cuba.⁵¹

From Professional League to Amateurs

Fidel moved quickly to utilize baseball for his own political advantages. Although they remained the same, Castro wasted no time inserting his image, the image of the new revolutionary government, into the baseball diamond. According to Thomas Carter, a historian, “At the culminating series in Havana Castro threw out the ceremonial first pitch and despite the escalations from the crowd for a speech, he insisted that he was like any other fan here to the game.”⁵² Through his reaction, Castro aligned himself with the game of baseball.

While the 1959-1960 seasons and 1960-1961 season continued under the new revolutionary government, baseball soon became another nationalized industry. The shift in baseball occurs in two ways, most notably, the elimination of the professional baseball

⁵¹ Ibid., 61.

⁵² Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Duke University Press, 2008), 59.

league. In 1961, the government created a new branch that served to facilitate and manage the new *INDER*, National Institute for Sports, Education, and Recreation. The government organization decided that the professional league no longer had a place on the island and was replaced by the Cuban League, amateur baseball. In creating *INDER*, Fidel Castro showed the importance of sports in his new Cuba. Castro successfully triumphed in the political revolution in Cuba; he faced more significant hills in the transition of society under the new government. The game of baseball, inherently tied to America, served as a foundation in Cuban psyche. Castro's government redefined the game of baseball to help satisfy their political agenda.⁵³

The IBAF Amateur World Series took place in April of 1961 and played directly into the hands of the redevelopment of Cuban baseball, Cuba threw a team together and even without lengthy preparation the team succeeded. While the Amateur World Series unfolded, the Cuban military successfully demolished the counter-insurgency, backed by the United States, in the famous Bay of Pigs.⁵⁴ The coincidental timing of the successful Cuban amateur baseball and the defeat of the counterinsurgency helped to consolidate the revolutionary government's appeal. The revolutionary government spent time and energy on the game of baseball in years to come, and every time a team took the field they became a physical embodiment of the state of Cuba.

The first official season of the new National Series occurred in 1962. *INDER* kept the same structure. The league only had four teams, but ideas of expansion were not out of the question and soon became a reality. The league expanded three times over the next decade: 1965 six teams, 1967 twelve teams, and finally in 1972 every province on the

⁵³ Peter C. Bjarkman, *History of Cuban Baseball*, (McFarland, 2014) 235.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

island enjoyed a team of their own.⁵⁵ By creating and fostering clubs across the island, the revolutionary government built a fan base that supported the people from their province but also strove to have their players in the all-star game and more importantly as part of the Cuban National Team. The Cuban National Team competed and won several international competitions over the next twenty years. The game of baseball found a place in the new revolutionary society. It remained a significant element of Cuban identity, while simultaneously acting to support the revolution.

The Politics of Baseball

The new revolutionary government employed the use of sports to develop a sense of nationhood and national pride, while distancing themselves from their new northern enemy. During the years of transition, the sports industry grew institutionally and politically. The creation of INDER showed the government's commitment to sports on the island. While INDER monitored all sports, baseball dominated INDER throughout the years. From attention to funding, the sport of baseball became a central focus of INDER.

A distinct character in history, Fidel redefined the nature of the relationship between the head of state and sport. "There has never been a case in which a head of state has been involved so prominently and for such a long period in a nation's favored sport as Fidel Castro been with baseball in Cuba."⁵⁶ Fidel did not shy away from the diamond, and Cubans' created their legends about the connections between baseball and Fidel. Legend has it that Fidel Castro as a young player performed exceptionally well, and

⁵⁵ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 30.

⁵⁶ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 352.

many major league teams sought to sign him. In one instance, he even received an offer from Major League teams, but in the end, the teams never put ink to paper.⁵⁷ The myth of Fidel Castro continues to this day. Many reporters have researched, and written articles on the old wives' tale, but research all ended without confirming the exact nature of the story.

Beyond the myths of the superstar pitcher, Fidel Castro and baseball have always been connected. Fidel's interests never deserved questioning: "Fidel Castro has long been viewed as the country's number one baseball and sports fan, and he has had life-long involvement in sport."⁵⁸ The passion that Fidel showed for baseball created a unique situation explicitly at the top of the government.

In the previous chapter, baseball functioned as a link between the United States and Cuba. Baseball created a direct line for shared ideas to flow between the island and the north. Following Cuban independence, baseball facilitated the transfer of technology. As Cuba transitioned out of the shadows of the United States the government sought to redefine many existing intuitions and ideas. The government began with the nationalization of various industries and companies, and then they nationalized sports. The Cuban people did not riot in the streets but quietly waited to see the new faction of sports on the island. INDER served to fill the void that people needed, and with the creation of a bureaucratic institution, ensured that the government messages and ideas would find their way onto the baseball diamond. Historian Eric Wagner points out the

⁵⁷ "Fidel Castro and Baseball" *Society for American Baseball Research*, accessed February 05, 2018, <http://sabr.org/bioproj/topic/fidel-castro-and-baseball>.

⁵⁸ Eric A. Wagner "Cuba and Nicaragua," in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency, and the Rise of Mass Culture*, ed. Joseph L. Arbena (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 131.

ramifications that are created by the government bringing sports to the people: “Most Cuban people, without active insurrectionary participation, waited for sport to be brought to them by the government. When it did come, sport could be structured in ways that support wide social and political goals of the government.”⁵⁹ As with the creation of any new government, the revolutionary government sought to recreate and continually foster a new sense of what it meant to be Cuban.

It is common for revolutionary governments to turn to sports to help provide a foundation for the creation, or even enhancement, of national identity. The revolutionary government successfully created a connection between people and baseball that enhanced the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the people.

Table 1: A Summary of Notable International Baseball Competition for Cuba⁶⁰

YEAR	COMPETITION	RESULT	NOTE
1963	Pan America Game	Win – Gold Medal	Defeat the US in Championship
1967	Pan America Game	Lose – Silver Medal	Lost to the US in Championship
1970	18 th Amateur World Series	Win	Beat the US Twice
1971	Amateur World Series	Win	Hosted in Cuba: Major Renovations performed on Estadio Latinoamerica

⁵⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁰ Peter C. Bjarkman, *History of Cuban Baseball*, (McFarland, 2014) Appendices A

1972	World Series XX	Win	Beat the US in Championship
1979	International Continental Cup Tournament	10-0	
1980	Amateur World Series	11-0	
1984	IBA World Series	Win - Gold Medal	
1987	Pan American Games	Win	

Every win against the United States solidified Fidel's power. The win in 1963 against the United States served to completely distance Cuba from the United States. They beat their much stronger neighbor to the North at their own game. Wins and losses became a line on the legacy of Fidel Castro. Fidel continually proved, during this time period, that his way of baseball, and his way of life, established a foundation for success and respect on the international level.

The Cuban government not only recreated the structure of sport, but they also created a connection with each province on the island to the National Series. The players that participated in the National Series are the ones to go on and compete internationally. In creating the fever for the game and the connection to the players, the government developed that feeling of being Cuban.⁶¹ A sense of nationhood is created with baseball. For Fidel Castro, international competition meant that he could show the success of his government structure to the world. Historians continually note how Fidel used baseball to demonstrate the achievement of the new Cuba, "As prominent producers of nationalist

⁶¹ Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Duke University Press, 2008), 161.

discourse, government leader, especially Fidel Castro, explicitly use sport in general and baseball, in particular, to establish a socialist-based position for being Cuban."⁶² Cuba's performance on an international level provided evidence to the Castro regime that their government was better than the US. Athletes were treated similarly to military personnel because each group, in its way, defended the Patria of Cuba.⁶³

Castro proved to be successful in his desires to perform at a high level. He held a mounting number of international victories under his tenure especially before 1989. The success over the years showed the continual development and importance of the game to the island. In all of these wins, Castro proved to the world the success of his government. He demonstrated explicitly to the United States that the Cuban baseball system continually performed better at America's game than Americans. Baseball created a two-fold power statement to the United States. In the first instance, baseball distinguished Cuba from the United States.⁶⁴ The political structure of Cuba differed significantly from the political structure of the United States, and when Cuba performed on the baseball diamond against America, they distinguish themselves from their former counterpart. Cuba benefits greatly from clear-cut success over the United States, and with each win they continued to diminish the United States attempts to discredit their revolutionary government.⁶⁵ Baseball served as an original tool for the government to

⁶² Ibid., 97.

⁶³ Eric A. Wagner "Cuba and Nicaragua," in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency, and the Rise of Mass Culture*, ed. Joseph L. Arbena (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 131

⁶⁴ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 535.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 354.

Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Duke University Press, 2008), 13.

create the feeling of being Cuban and eventually became the tool for dominating one of their most hated enemies.

Popularity and Patria of Baseball

The question then becomes how do we measure the depth of popularity of sports in Cuba? Before the revolution, one of the primary elements that defined society was baseball. The foundation existed for the new revolutionary government to incorporate sports and specifically baseball into their plan. Eric Wagner examines sport in a revolutionary context, and he notes that the Cuban government acted similarly to other revolutionary governments in relation to sports: "Sport is a deeply entrenched social institution, and revolution is not likely to change fundamental interest in sport. People who have been involved in sport continue to be involved."⁶⁶ While Wagner makes this claim, evidence demonstrates that baseball enhanced the revolution to ensure that Baseball remained a faction of Cuba. The interest existed in Cuba during the revolution and far beyond and the revolutionary government created an entire government sector responsible for sports. What cannot easily be measured during the revolutionary period and afterward is the interest that exists from the perspective of an everyday person. As a result of this, frequency in news publications becomes the best tool to identifying and verifying people's everyday interest. Finding evidence to demonstrate that the government found value in sports, measuring people's interest is slightly more complicated.

⁶⁶ Eric A. Wagner "Cuba and Nicaragua," in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency, and the Rise of Mass Culture*, ed. Joseph L. Arbena (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 115.

An examination of the content covered in *Semanario Deportivo LPV*, a weekly-published popular sports magazine, provides a hint of what Cubans cared about during the period. Although the chart expands beyond the years of this chapter, the data examined in the table shows the importance of a sport based on the number of times the magazine covered it.⁶⁷

TABLE 1
CONTENT ANALYSIS OF *SEMANARIO DEPORTIVO LPV*

SPORTS AND OTHER ACTIVITIES	127 Issues 1969-1972			50 Issues 1982-1983		
	Number of Times on Front or Back Cover	Total Pages	Average Pages Per Issue	Number of Times on Front or Back Cover	Total Pages	Average Pages Per Issue
Specific Sports						
Baseball	52	843	6.64	5	159	3.18
Chess	7	301	2.37	0	115	2.30
Track and Field	16	300	2.36	13	74	1.48
Soccer	13	286	2.25	2	61	1.22
Gymnastics	18	172	1.35	4	50	1.00
Bicycling	8	152	1.20	4	39	.78
Volleyball	9	146	1.15	2	33	.66
Basketball	13	129	1.02	5	49	.98
Swimming/Diving	7	122	.96	7	47	.94
Boxing	6	108	.85	7	85	1.70
Sailing, Fishing	10	95	.75	1	22	.44
Fencing	10	94	.74	6	20	.40
Rowing	5	87	.69	1	27	.54
Weightlifting	2	76	.60	4	31	.62
Motorcycling	7	62	.49	1	15	.30
Wrestling	4	57	.45	4	31	.62
Rifle, Shooting	4	56	.44	2	17	.34
Tennis	3	55	.43	1	11	.22
Judo	2	49	.39	4	19	.38
Water Polo	4	40	.31	2	11	.22
Table Tennis	0	40	.31	2	11	.22
Non-Specific Sport-Related Activities						
Miscellaneous	27	426	3.35	17	476	9.52
Mixed Sports	9	357	2.81	3	193	3.86
School Sports	18	268	2.11	1	38	.76
TOTALS	254	4321	34.02	100	1634	32.68

Baseball dominates. Baseball appears in both time periods on more pages than any other sport. It only holds the front cover five times and falls short as the top appearing sport.

⁶⁷ Eric A. Wagner "Cuba and Nicaragua," in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency, and the Rise of Mass Culture*, ed. Joseph L. Arbena (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 125.

Through my research, I did not have access to enough of these magazines to have substantial evidence to examine them across time. The author of an article that I used for my research did have access to them. He created the chart above for his report. While he analyzes the above chart in his work, the table provides merely a set of condensed information about the magazines content.

While the chart easily shows the interest that people enjoyed in sports generally, it illustrates explicitly the importance that people continued to have in the game of baseball. People from any part of Cuban Society, before the revolution, attended baseball games. The evening of the playing field that occurred during Castro's socialist revolution even more so closed the gap that existed between people in Cuba. When an individual attended a baseball game, they felt at one with the people around them and even identified with government officials that participated in the game. The Cuban revolutionary government sought to give people equal access to resources on the island. Baseball served as one of the government's resources and the people responded to the accessibility of the game. The author of the chart above explained that the interest of baseball relied heavily on the interest of the "masses" and how it continued throughout the revolutionary period.⁶⁸ The setting and ascetics of attending a baseball game contributed to the countries interest, but also added to the purpose of baseball for the nation; a sense of community and belonging fostered within the walls of a stadium. People escaped their daily lives while simultaneously stating their opinions in an uninhibited form at baseball games. Baseball served the government as a way promote political views but also remained the most popular sport on the island.

Fidel and his Influence

Fidel Castro delivers two notable speeches to athletes in 1961 and again in 1970. His message in each of them served similar purposes. The initial speech served to show the place of Cuban sports in the success of the revolution, and the ways in which the revolution benefited from sports. He continued on the discuss the transition that sports

⁶⁸ Ibid., 131.

made along side the revolution and how that in turn benefited sports in the long run. He placed a lot of emphasis on the fact that Cuban baseball no longer represented the commercialization of sports, baseball in Cuba truly sought to provide a good game without diminishing the human nature of any ball player. Specifically, players were no longer forced to be bought and sold as a way to play in the league. He touched on the importance of this new wave of baseball and the lasting effects it would have in Cuba, "You will be the pioneers of sane sports in our country and you will set the marks and the successes which will be the goals that coming generations will have to exceed."⁶⁹

In 1971, Castro more frequently mentioned baseball specifically. He touched on the elimination of professional sports in Cuba. He heavily noted the success that Cuban teams had over the United States. Interestingly, he pointed out an announcer that initially praised the Cuban team and then turned around to say that Cuban baseball lacked the competitive nature of professionalism, "Recently, a sports commentator, who had recently been praising our baseball players--perhaps a little too much--was apparently given a warning."⁷⁰ Fidel condemned this way of thinking and noted that in the moment of an announcer's comments, Cuban sports performed at a high level due to their lack of professionalism. He continued to spend a large portion of time focused on the baseball team at an upcoming festival. The importance of this commentary served to show that baseball was an important topic in Cuba.

Each of these speeches help to prove the importance of baseball to Cuban society. The interest of people can be seen through the magazine publications, but the importance

⁶⁹ "Castro: 1962 Speech to the Athletes." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro62.html>.

⁷⁰ "Castro: 1970 Speech to the Athletes." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro70.html>.

to the overall government is shown through these speeches. The creation of INDER showed the interest in sports, but Fidel's diligence to address athletes during these years displayed his continued attention and support of Cuban athletes. Baseball served all people during the revolutionary period, politically and socially.

The Next Chapter

Sports appear to have functioned well within the post-revolutionary society. The support of the Soviet Union aided the Cuban economy and provided an ideological friend to the Cuban government. Cuba and the Soviet Union used sports as a way to project the success of their ideologies on an international stage. The collapse of the Soviet Union proved to be a defining shift in Cuba as a country and a nation. The collapse changed Cuba as a whole. How would baseball remain an important aspect given the rapid economic decline in Cuba during the Special Period? Castro and his revolutionary government profited from the preexisting relationship that existed between Cubans and baseball and heightened it into a sense of national pride not only on the island but abroad. Baseball would be forced to shift to the new social and political reality, but it also remained an entity for Cubans to hold tight to.

Chapter 3

The Special Period to President Obama

1989-2016

“But in 1997, like Cuban baseball itself, it (estadiolatinoameria) was undergoing an overhaul. The dirt and grass on the playing field were new, but upon closer inspection something was amiss. There were deep holes in the outfield grass and the infield dirt stuck to their shoes.”

-Milton Jamail⁷¹

Cuba faced dramatic changes in the late 20th century. Following the first three decades of the revolutionary society, the economy and livelihood of all Cubans came to a halt. An economic downturn began in 1990 as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba's closest socialist ally. Cuban people immediately felt the effects of the fall of the Soviet Union, and they continue to suffer from the loss of Soviet support to this day. The Cuban government and people took decisive measures that centered around survival, specifically survival of the Socialist Government. The government expected the commitment and cooperation of the Cuban people. As a result of these expectations, Cubans sacrificed many aspects of their lives while new customs and standards of living formed.

⁷¹ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 62.

Baseball during the Special Period played several essential roles. Baseball continued to play a political role, and during the Special Period, it extended far beyond wins and losses on the diamond. Also, baseball transformed into a labor organization that provided labor to other countries by having people coach and play abroad. The quality of baseball in Cuba suffered as a result of players desire to go, and coach and importantly defection to the United States played a vital role in the diminishing quality of Cuban baseball during the special period. Beyond all of the factors listed above, baseball remained an integral part of Cuban society: it became a symbol of something to hold onto and outlasted the economic downturn of Cuba by remaining firm in the hearts of Cubans.

Special Period Historical Context

Fidel Castro declared “A Special Period in a Time of Peace”⁷² in August of 1990. The deterioration of the Soviet Union, and eventually its collapse in December 1991, lead Castro to prepare his country for the future without their strongest ally. Castro faced a challenge from former commanders whose actions resulted in their death by firing squad. His reaction and management of the economic crisis intended to sustain the idea that Cuba, a one-party country, looked no further than their one party and new parties were not accepted. By merely examining the numbers of the Special Period, it becomes easier to comprehend the types of struggles the Cuban Citizens faced. The crash of the Soviet Union resulted in a loss of exports and imports by 80%.⁷³ The loss of exports and imports resulted in an overall loss of 34% of the total GDP for Cuba. Castro responded to the new Russian government’s lack of desire to fulfill deals made by the Soviet leaders by

⁷² Paul J. Dosal, *Cuba Libre: A Brief History of Cuba*. (Harlan Davidson, 2006.), 100.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 95-100

cancelling all oil deliveries from Russia. His actions resulted in an immediate need to conserve the oil that the Cuban government had on hand within one week of the decision.⁷⁴

The beginning of the Special Period and the economic and political policies that surround it requires a discussion of the United States actions towards the Cuban government and the preexisting embargo. While the collapse of the Soviet Union provided a sense of victory to the US, following the Cold War politics, the United States quickly turned their heads ninety miles south to Cuba. During the onset of the economic crisis in Cuba, the United States felt that the collapse of the Soviet Union laid the perfect foundation to force Cuba into a failure, ultimately a breakdown of the revolutionary government they despised. Two United States Presidents brought about legislation to tighten the rope already around the Cuban government's neck. George H. W. Bush approved the Torricelli Act that "prohibited the subsidiaries of American companies in other countries from trading with Cuba."⁷⁵ Four years later in 1996, Bill Clinton allowed further restrictions on Cuba through the Democratic Solidarity Act that "authorized American citizens, to sue foreign companies that traded with or invest in Cuban Companies that possessed properties expropriated by Castro after 1959."⁷⁶ Two legislative acts passed by the United States further restricted the Cuban economy. Castro fought to keep US from succeeding in providing the foundation for a collapse of his country.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 97

⁷⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 123.

Castro attempted to keep the entire country together, but the country faced serious deterioration in many sectors such as housing and food supply. The initial reaction to the crisis resulted in dysfunction within the transportation, agriculture and food sectors. Initially, before the 1996 Democratic Solidarity Act, the Cuban people were able to receive foreign aid even from the United States. Simply put, the Cuban people were physically starving with no way to combat the decline.⁷⁷ The Cuban government sought ways to help offset the income they lost. Expansion in the tourism industry help to provide a method to subsidize the lost foreign currency from Soviet Union oil. While the industry grew, along with it the appearance of the US dollar, the country still lacked enough to feed their people. Reportedly during the 90s people ate anything they could get their hands on. People suffered from malnourishment, and the lack of food forced the government to ration food. The phrase that Fidel continually ends his speeches with "Socialism or Death, Fatherland or Death"⁷⁸ developed an entirely new meaning during the early years of the Special Period. Although the current state of Cuba is much better off than the Special Period, people still lack the power to choose foods and the complete freedom not to fear the potential deficit of items they need.⁷⁹

Fidel's Perspective of Baseball

With a mounting number of social and humanitarian issues, one might easily presume that baseball disappeared entirely on the island: why would people care about a

⁷⁷ "Ibid., 115.

⁷⁸ "Castro: 1991 at Pan-American Village Ceremony." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro91a.html>.

⁷⁹ Paul J. Dosal, *Cuba Libre: A Brief History of Cuba*. (Harlan Davidson, 2006.), 102.

game when they were starving? While sports function as a way to appease the people during times of struggle, for Cuba the passion surround baseball remained resilient. During the later part of the 20th century, Cuba began charging admission to baseball games, while this was a minimal charge people still paid it even though they barely could provide for their families. Many prominent sporting events occurred during the 1990s. From the Pan-American Games to the Olympics to the defection crisis that happened with baseball on the island, Fidel's initial speeches addressed his country and the world regarding sports extensively during the 90s. His focus on games, even during a time of crisis, showed the value and importance of baseball to Cuba. Beginning in 1991, Fidel Castro addressed the country through eight different speeches across a nine-year span. He discussed various historical sporting events that occur on the island and abroad; also, he confronted the defectors, and placed blame on the United States for their role in defection from the island. He directly referred to the construction of facilities for the Pan-American games in his first speech. In his speech, he addressed the foreseeable economic crisis:

Then there were serious problems in the international front that had a straightforward impact on our economy. As he [Ferdenez, a member of the executive committee in Cuba for the Pan-American Games] explained, the projects were underway; the buildings were under construction. Most of the spending had already occurred on what was necessary to build all this.⁸⁰

Castro continually discussed the importance of the Pan-America games to the sporting world and the Cuban sports world. At the conclusion of his speech, he discerned that politics and sports discussion do not occur in the same conversation. Overall, the

⁸⁰ "Castro: 1991 at Pan-American Village Ceremony." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro91a.html>.

conclusion of the speech served a distinct purpose to show that Fidel cannot help but include politics in with the sports world. To him and the rest of the Cuban government sports and politics fall in the same category. Sports was merely an expression of politics.

Following the Pan-American Games, Castro delivered another speech in which he discussed the results of the 1991 Pan-American Games. Fidel began his speech by mentioning the propaganda and the negative commentary made by other countries about Cuba. He continued to say that despite all of the negativity the games succeeded. Fidel noted the success based on gold medals, Cuba obtaining the most, and he kept on to claim that before the revolution the United States previously dominated games such as this, but that trend has since ended. He used baseball several times as an example. One instance to explain the way that medals count worked and in other sense, he mentions the popularity within the country of Cuba.

In Cuba, everyone wants to be a baseball champion, everywhere. They play as boys with rubber balls, batting with their hands, catching with their hands, and then with a harder ball, then with mitt and a bat. Any little baseball team can be organized anywhere.⁸¹

By stating that baseball served the Cuban people everywhere, organized and unorganized, the expansive and inclusive nature of baseball showed its lasting place on the island. Once again, Fidel concluded his speech with politics, but this time he merely ended it the way all his speeches ended, "Socialism or death! Fatherland or death!" rather than

⁸¹ "Castro: 1991 Speech at Post-Pan-Am Games Ceremony." *PBS.*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro91b.html>.

discussing politics in-depth.⁸² Fidel specifically mentioned and addressed baseball in his remarks. He points to the unified nature of the sport and how it served his country. Since he used baseball, rather than other games, specifically to articulate the impact across age groups and the island it showed the importance of baseball, specifically in this case revolutionary baseball, in society.

In 1992 and 1993, Fidel took explicitly time to address the outstanding athletes and their performance. In these two speeches, he pointed out the prestige in which athletes that represent their country will receive. He noted in both statements the influence of baseball and society. In 1992 he stated, " We have been demonstrating in practice that many things are possible; a number of games at night, games during the day, number of trips in baseball, which is the sport that our people like so much."⁸³ By taking the time to note the popularity of baseball on the island he illustrated the importance that it served. He never needed to address it specifically, but because of its importance, Fidel mentioned baseball. Another key element that Fidel addressed is the topic of politics and sports, especially the value of winning and doing well. "Medals are worth much, but the medal of the fatherland's prestige is worth even more."⁸⁴ Wins meant more than a medal: it provided a path for socialism to win and outlast its competitors, wins in sporting events embodied what Fidel hoped would become the future of the politic spectrum.

⁸² "Castro: 1991 Speech at Post-Pan-Am Games Ceremony." *PBS*, Accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro91b.html>.

⁸³ "Castro: 1992 Speech to Outstanding Athletes." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro92.html>.

⁸⁴ "Castro: 1993 Speech to Outstanding Athletes." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro93.html>.

1993

All of the speeches prior to 1996 addressed the Cuban nation and attempted to shine light on the successes of the revolution. Each speech prior to 1996 enhanced the view of sport on the island, and showed the importance of sport to the Cuban people. While it is known that the game of baseball portrayed the power and influence on the international level, Fidel continually addressed the present nature of Cuba and the international results as a product of the events occurring at home. While the defections to the US altered the dynamic of Cuban baseball, the government continued to pursue baseball as a legitimizer. He never once mentioned that anyone has control over their sports other than Cubans themselves. All of that shifts in 1996 when he addressed the defection issue.

For the next few year, Fidel addressed the population, but in 1996 he discussed the crisis of defection. Cuba as a country suffered from a talent drain, specifically baseball during the 1990s. Teams from the Major Leagues scouted players. To try and have a better life for themselves, they defected from Cuba leaving behind their family and entire life for the promise of money up North. Finally, in 1996, Fidel felt the viable solution was a public address. Fidel claimed the reason the United States sought after the talent of Cuban baseball players centered around the fact that the United States, lacked the capabilities to beat the Cuban team. Castro mentioned that the difference between the United States and Cuba was money. The US controlled the capital that persuaded players while Cuba did not, and did not morally believe in it.⁸⁵ Fidel's timely addressed the country regarding the defection crisis before the 1996 Olympic Games. The fact that

⁸⁵ "Castro: 1996 Speech Blaming U.S. for Defection." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro96.html>.

Fidel made these statements and claims showed the lasting ramifications that the Cuban nation felt before the Olympic games that occurred later in 1996.

Following the Olympic Games, Fidel addressed the athletes that participated and performed exceptionally. Within the first few paragraphs, he mentioned the performance of the baseball team. He recognized their performance first above all other sports:

*The victory of our baseball team was especially outstanding because you know what happened. You know how the great adversary prepared himself [the United States]. You know how they tried to leave us without pitchers. You know how the team had to lift up its spirit to attain what he was able to attain. The team gave the country one of its greatest satisfaction. It undermined one of the greatest dreams of the adversary.*⁸⁶

The success and triumph of the baseball team during the Olympics brought the Cuban people what they wanted and provided the government with political ammunition. The people of Cuba saw a win during a time of immense struggle, while the government saw the wins at the Olympics as a sign of political triumph over the greedy neighbors to the north.

The PanAm Games rolled around again before the start of the new century. Fidel delivered another speech on July 26th. This speech mentioned the sport of baseball more specifically than the others previously mentioned. In this speech, Fidel dramatically contrasted the commercialization of baseball in the United States and the countries that fed into Major League baseball, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. He stated that the United States claimed the players from these countries and deprived them of the right

⁸⁶ "1996 Welcome to Olympic Athletes." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro96b.html>.

to be represented by their people at the international level. He discussed the heightened importance of amateurism and how it prevents greed and commercialization from consuming the game, but simultaneously he recognized that the people who performed baseball in a capitalist manner have made substantial leaps and closed some of the gaps that used to exist between the purely amateur talent in Cuba and the paid collected talent in the United States.⁸⁷

Lastly, following the Pan American Games of 1999, Fidel addressed the entire sports community of Cuba. He provided a general synopsis of the events that have occurred in sports over the past decade, illustrating the uphill battle that Cuba successfully climbed without the help of the outside world. He covered the revolution and the different society that existed between Cuba and the United States. While he provided substantial evidence of why Cuba provided the perfect home to the Olympic Games, he pointed out issues with other countries. While the speech did not directly discuss baseball, it offered insight into the influence of sports and the Cuban society. People were starving on the streets of Cuba in the past five-year period, and without fail, their revolutionary leader spoke to athletes and committee members about how Cuba provided the perfect locations for the Olympic Games. While the Games could have potentially served as a major boost to the tourism industry, it seems that hosting these games while simultaneously discussing the prior success of Cuban teams attempted to prompt the politics of Cuba rather than one that aimed at feeding the Cuban people.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ "Castro: 1999 on Cuban Sports." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018.
<http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro99a.html>.

⁸⁸ "Castro: 1999 on PanAm Games." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018.
<http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro99b.html>.

Each of these speeches occurred at different times across a nine-year span, and each provided a distinct perspective of sport in Cuban society during the last decade of the twentieth century. The game of baseball showed its importance during a period when people understood the limited funding and the fewer number of renovation. The Cuban baseball team found a way to shine through it all and provided their country with a sense of pride. Fidel never missed an opportunity to capitalize politically on the sports wins and note that although his socialist regime struggled it was far from disappearing.⁸⁹

Following Fidel's speech in 1996, he addressed the international scale at first and then the events occurring within the country as a response. This opposed his prior approach. He strove to display Cuba as a country on the international scale, but in some ways he had to sustain the Cubans international standing first and then show the importance to Cubans at home. The speeches portray the importance of sports and specifically baseball to the Cuban society. Illustrated within these speeches is the depth and breathe of baseball in a society facing pressing economic issues.

The Two Perspectives of the Cuban People

Baseball remained at the forefront of political and social conversation before and after the Special Period. Several historians studied Cuba during the 1990s into the 2000s and they differ widely on their interpretation of baseball in society. They all agree that baseball plays a role in society. Even during the economic crisis and struggle, Cuban baseball maintained a place in the minds of Cuban people.

⁸⁹ "Castro: 1999 to PanAm Athletes." *PBS*, accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/sport/castro99c.html>.

On the one hand, the die-hard opinionated fans persisted to exist during the Special Period. The rhetoric surround Cuban fans included words such as passionate, opinionated, and strong-willed. An agreed upon observation of Cubans showed that the passion for arguing about baseball persisted whether they experienced satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the Cuban baseball teams. Over an over again opinions and the thoughts of Cuban fans continually made their way into historians' writings. Milton Jamal coined one of the best descriptions of Cuban fans: "Everyone in Cuba has an opinion about baseball and wants to be the manager."⁹⁰ While Thomas Carter described the passion and fever of the opinions of Cubans: "These fans do much more than merely convert; by definition what they do is argue passionately."⁹¹ Each of the depictions here illustrated the fever that exists in Cuba for baseball, all the while the people suffered major economic decline. Specifically, in Parque Central men gathered, in what is known as "La Esquina Caliente," and they discussed baseball feverishly. The men that met to discuss baseball knew more information about baseball than most of the world. They argued players and trades and calls during previous games; they especially questioned outsiders, and Thomas Carter stated that these men quizzed him vigorously before allowing him to observe the conversation,. La Esquina Caliente illustrated more than the repeated conversation of baseball; it represented the spirit of knowledge and understanding of the game. "Being Cuban in this context is validated by more than where one is born. It requires specific forms of cultural knowledge, the knowledge that

⁹⁰ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States:Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 50.

⁹¹ Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Duke University Press, 2008), 136.

individuals must be able to articulate, not simply possess."⁹² These men expressed their passion and pride of the Cuban nation by the in-depth discussion of their game of pride, and the fever in which they discussed the play depicts the overall importance of baseball to these men, and Cuba as a whole.

While people supported and encouraged baseball during the Special Period, the way people helped baseball occurred differently. A contrast between athletes and everyday citizens existed. The economic crisis forced the Cuban government to cut spending across the board. Although the budget for INDER and sports eventually became non-existent, sports persisted. Luckily for the Cuban people, the game became a diversion from the dysfunction and minimal resources they possessed.

*Well, at least we get the circus. I think baseball calms people because it's a chance to forge. It's a means of escape. You're worried because you had two eggs left and you ate them yesterday. You're worried because you don't know when you'll eat next, so you go off to watch the game. You go to watch baseball and forget everything else or at least for as long as your belly lets you.*⁹³

The game provided a sense of escape from the everyday struggles. For some, in Cuba, the game provided the diversion they needed for others the game proved to be a disappointment and a clear example of the dismal state that the Cuban country and nation were in.

The negative responses to baseball vary widely, but they all appear to revert to a central point: local baseball in Cuba during the 1990s severely declined. The players that

⁹² Ibid., 143.

⁹³ Kyle T. Doherty. "The Cause of Baseball" *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* (Fall 2012) pp. 53-68 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/503654/pdf>

participated in the Cuban League lacked the same performance level previously experienced by fans. Various reason exists for the decline in competitive nature of the Cuban League. One of the most obvious reasons, and typically the only reason, stemmed from the defectors. Cuban baseball lost countless numbers of fantastic players to the United States. The United States provided a monetary value unmatched by the Cuban government. People in Cuba starved during the Special Period, and these athletes obtained the chance for a better life and an income like they had never seen. Of course, they left their country, never to return. The defectors left their mark on the Cuban people and sparked an interest regarding their performance in the Major Leagues.

Another key component that created a distaste regarding baseball resulted from the new retirement and work abroad policy. Athletes did not have the capabilities to provide a substantial income for their family by simply playing the game alone. The Cuban government enacted a new retirement policy that allowed Cubans to quit playing baseball before the physical end of their career and then they obtained the possibility to go abroad and play or coach. Monetarily speaking playing or coaching abroad provided a better income for a family than playing on the diamonds in Cuba.⁹⁴ While Cubans received more money abroad, the Cuban government, of course, capitalized from the money made by collecting 80% of the money earned abroad, which created an interesting dynamic between the ideas of the revolution and capitalism. The government helped the player to get to these new positions and felt that they still deserved a portion of the profits. A new division of the Cuban government, *Cubadeportes*, became the department responsible for the exportation of sports labor on the island. The country that once argued

⁹⁴ Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (United States:Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 64.

against the use of sports talent as a means for money was left without a choice if they wanted to sustain their socialist country. The reaction by Cubans to the new retirement policy left the fans unhappy and dissatisfied. They, the people, felt that the entire game of baseball became focused on gold medals and winning international competitions. The focus of the game no longer centered around providing quality baseball at home, it focused on winning baseball competitions and outperforming other countries for propaganda purposes.⁹⁵

In addition to the decline in play and the shipment of players and personal of seas, the economic and social state of Cuba at the time forced people to focus on providing for their family rather than anything additional. People needed to eat, and they starved, without a foreseeable end to the crisis. Baseball, while it lived in the hearts of Cubans, fell to the side because they could not provide for their basic needs. The people had "necessities" and issues that needed resolutions before they could once again place their focus back on the diamond.⁹⁶ From the economic issues plaguing the entire country, people began to examine the results of the revolution itself. How had the lives of people changed? For better or for worse? One historian explained simply the results of the revolution as seen by the Cuban people during the late 1990s and early 2000s. "The three main accomplishments of the revolution are, as Castro says, education, medical treatment, and sports. The three main failures are breakfast, lunch, and dinner."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ibid., 64,65,70.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁹⁷ Joseph Arbena and David G. LaFrance. "Sport in Latin America and the Caribbean" (Lanham, MD:Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 147.

Baseball Diplomacy

Cuba invented baseball diplomacy.⁹⁸ Many people instantaneously think of the term baseball diplomacy when they hear Cuba. There are various representations of baseball diplomacy, but two especially that stand out from the others: the game between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban National Team that occurred in 1999 and more recently President Obama's visit to Cuba. The two teams met twice in 1999, once in March in Havana and the more notable time in the United States in May. Baltimore won the game that occurred in Havana and the Cuban National Team won the game that occurred in the US. By beating the United States, on US soil, meant more. The Cuban National Team made a profound statement.

The game between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban national team occurred in May 1999; the game marked a critical point in history because the Cuban national team exclusively played outside the United States since 1957. This became the first meeting in the US since 1957. While many people discuss how the game represented the conflict between the two teams, there are contrasting opinions. One the Baltimore Orioles did not hold the status of a national organization as the Cuban team did. Another element of the game provided insight into the relational side of the US and Cuba: "It also deviated from

⁹⁸ Other examples of baseball diplomacy exist, and other games serve to support the mechanization of baseball in Cuban society. For example, the World Baseball Classic in 2006 served as a mounting defeat for Cuba as they lost to Japan in the final round. This loss along with mounting economic issues, illustrated the deteriorating situation in Cuba. While the world baseball classic serves as an important example, the games that occur between specifically the US and Cuba supports the efforts of this research.

the norms of international sports spectacles in that the contest was not between two teams representing countries but between different understandings of one country, Cuba."⁹⁹

The ideas that surrounded the game differed based on the location of the fan. For Cubans, they saw a chance to show off their skilled baseball team, while the US found a way to make Cuba seem less awful and many argue that the game and the media portrayal helped to begin the forefront of potential relations between Cuba and the United States.¹⁰⁰ Although as much as the media attempted to make the events non-political they eventually became political. Issues arose when the United States government denied Cuba officials the right to visas because of their association with the communist party. Even the money side of the event became controversial and ended with the money going to neither the US or Cuba, but rather a charity in Central America.¹⁰¹ The US government even provided a "safe space" for defectors to go if they wished to not return to Cuba. The protest occurred on the street surrounding the stadium. People who once called Cuba their home protested the Castro regime and, people who wanted better relations with Cuba protested simultaneously.

Specifically, for Fidel Castro, the game that occurred in the US meant everything to his revolutionary message. He and his revolutionary government succeeded in defeating the US at their own sporting event on their soil. The significance is found in the symbols of the game, amateurs beating professionals. Not only had the US been defeated on their own soil at their own game, but they failed to beat the Cubans despite stealing many of their talented ballplayers.

⁹⁹ Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Duke University Press, 2008), 90.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

Arguments exist that the game between the Orioles and the Cuban national team does not represent baseball diplomacy because the Orioles do not represent the entire country. While the argument stands on solid ground, another perspective occurs that is important to consider. Baseball diplomacy relied heavily upon the images that arise.

In the case of this game, the game represents the underlying foundation for baseball diplomacy. The idea that the Cuban national team even set foot on US soil is a significant event within itself, much less to play against a group of professionals that the head of the Cuba regime continually demeans. Arguably, the game focused more on the symbols and the actual occurrence of the event and the conversations that came from the fact. "Easily embodied in sport, the political discourse of passion elide the transference of collective identities into morality plays performed before an audience in athletic competition."¹⁰² While the 1999 Orioles theoretically lacked the title of the national team, in the case of the game that occurred in May 1999, for all intensive purpose, they embodied a national team.

The second and more recent, an example of baseball diplomacy occurred during President Obama's visit to Cuba in 2016. Many people attacked Obama for his attendance at the game, but the purpose his appearance at the game served extended far beyond the angered Americans. He, Obama, employed imagery in the narrative of Cuban relations by appearing at a baseball game. His appearance provided the Cuban people with a specific gauge on the level of seriousness regarding the potential re-opening of relations. Historians continually note that the appeals of state leaders at Cuban baseball game provided a sense of unison and solidarity. Obama's attendance at the game showed

¹⁰² Ibid., 101

the work and effort physically that each country attempted to put into the potential reopening of relations. Obama and his visit provided a distinct moment and image that stayed with the Cuban and American relation talks for years to come. Obama used the once American game to show the commitment and the necessity to open relations. The diamond, a symbol of the Cuban nation, once again served to bring together Cuba and the United States.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Tom Verducci, “Baseball diplomacy: Cuba-US relations will change game” accessed February 28, 2018, <https://www.si.com/mlb/2016/03/22/cuba-united-states-barack-obama-rays>.

Conclusion

“It is part of being Cuban. Baseball is one of the roots of Cuban Reality.”

-Milton Jamail¹⁰⁴

A simple ball and stick game represents the trials and tribulations and importantly the spirit of Cuba. From the inception of Cuba, Cubans faced many challenges and uphill battles. From fending off Spain as their colonial power to the push for separation from the United States to the triumphs of the revolution to the realities of the economic crisis today Cuba persisted. Cuba, as a country, faced a mounting number of obstacles. While their country today lacks resources, the island and the people of Cuba have a story, a message, and a purpose. They found ways to overcome obstacles. The Cuban spirit is alive and well and lives in people who reside on the island and more importantly lives in those that do not call the island home. The question for this project, in particular, is “What role does baseball play in Cuba?” The country of Cuba has shifted dramatically since its inception, but baseball continually remains an active part of Cuban Culture. The embodiment of the spirit of the Cuban nation is baseball.

The game of baseball always meant something more to Cuba. From 1868, baseball became a way to stand up to their colonial ruler. It brought unity between the United States and Cuba during the early part of the 20th century. Baseball acted as an agent of US influence. It helps to industrialize the island by intertwining the social

¹⁰⁴ Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

interest of Cuba with the United States. The game established a significant foothold on the island during this time because it reached people from all socio-economic classes and stretched across the entire island. Baseball became a component of society during the early twentieth century, and the foundation laid during this period allowed for baseball to grow in importance and popularity in the years that followed.

For Cuba, the revolution and the post-revolution time period shape the Cuba of the present. The decisions made during this time period create the foundation that the current state of Cuba sits upon. Baseball during this time period takes on an entirely different role than the pre-revolutionary period. Baseball became an agent of the Revolution. It served to prove legitimacy on the international stage while simultaneously providing an image to the people at home in Cuba. Baseball became a context piece of Cuba during this time period. All of the provinces received teams during this time period, and people all over Cuba felt connected through the game of baseball.

From the Special Period into modern-day Cuba, baseball, and the influence of it is still very much alive. The mounting economic, political, and social issues have created significant obstacles for the game of baseball, but baseball has nonetheless persisted. While Cuban baseball talent works and plays abroad, the important nature of Cuban baseball is still intact on the island. In some cases, people lack necessities, but most still have an opinion regarding the game of baseball. Men still meet in a park to furiously debate and discuss the game. Although the glory and shine of what once was Cuba baseball may have faded the fire in the hearts of the Cuban people has not burned out.

Overall, through the evidence shown in this project, it is undeniable that for Cuba baseball is essential. It served their country since the inceptions and continually prevailed

despite mounting odds. Baseball contributes to the overall understanding of the social, political, and economic history of Cuba. The game of baseball provides a physical embodiment of what it means to be Cuba. Baseball provides a lens to interpret and understand Cuba's political history, from colonialism to nation to revolution. From the game of the elites, to the popular sugarcane farms to the Cuban amateur league Baseball changes with politics and baseball provides legitimacy for political movements. Baseball serves the Cuban nation through the domestic and international shifts as a key symbol; Cuban baseball's wins against international competitors in significant games provided satisfaction to the people of Cuba. Baseball's success equaled triumph for Cuba's revolution on the world stage.

Baseball can teach lessons; it can explain complicated situations. What cannot be ignored is the power of baseball on the island. It provides a physical image of the Cuban identity and has served this island for over 100 years. Cuban baseball embodies the spirit of national identity on the island. The game of baseball is much more than wins and loss just as Cuba is much more than initially meets the eye. Baseball is all about crossing home plate, and baseball will continue to find a spot in the line-up of Cuban social structure for years to come. Baseball exemplifies the spirit of what it means to be Cuban.

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