

What It's Like to Watch Béisbol in Cuba Wall Street Journal December 26, 2013

Havana

Baseball was one of the main reasons I visited Cuba last month. Growing up in Europe, I used to watch the Cuban national baseball team show up for tournaments in the Netherlands looking like a squad of recreational leaguers. Dressed in faded uniforms, they smoked cigarettes in public and carried equipment in plastic bags. On the field, however, they almost always destroyed sartorially superior American, Japanese, Dutch and Korean squads.

It made me want to see these Cubans play at home, on their own turf, which by the way offers something that's hard to find in America, where I live now: winter baseball. The National Series—Cuba's top level of play—runs November to April.

What I discovered during a visit to Cuba last month surprised me. No, the level of play, particularly the pitching, didn't come close to matching even a bad Major League Baseball game. And you can see top Cuban players at home, such as Yasiel Puig, the outfielder who starred this season for the Los Angeles Dodgers, or first baseman Jose Abreu, who this off-season received \$68 million over six years from the Chicago White Sox.

Rather, Cuba's real world champions are its fans. The island loves baseball more than anyplace I've been. I can go weeks in America without running into a fellow seamhead. In Cuba, it was easily the best, most available conversation lubricant.

"Me gusta los Baltimore Orioles," I'd say. "¿Conoces Manny Machado?" Yes, they all knew him.



Fans sitting on the hard, high-school-like steps of the stadium John Miller

I got to three games, all at the Estadio Latinoamericano, a 1946 ballpark a couple of miles southwest of Old Havana. It is the home of Industriales, winners of 12 championships, the Yankees of Cuba. I saw the best.

The Estadio is said to seat 55,000, but its size feels between minor- and major-league. A half-dozen stands outside sell beer and soda, and different meats on bread. The prices are pennies for locals, while tourists pay U.S.-level prices. (Cuba uses a dual-currency system to soak outsiders.)

The stadium bowl is symmetrical, like the cookie-cutter American parks of the 1960s, but without upper decks. The ramshackle press box hanging behind home plate looks like a stiff breeze could airlift it to Miami. There is no corporate marketing anywhere; no Budweiser or Coke signs. Only a bit of writing breaking up the blue: Beyond the left field fence, a sign hails "Cuba, Pais des Campiones." And in right: "El Deporte, Conquista De La Revolucion."

On the three nights that I went—one rainout and two Industriales wins—no one was allowed to sit in the outfield seats. I tried and was waved away by police. The crowds are predominantly young and male, and make up a sea of earrings, necklaces and gelled hair.

Admission is about 12 cents for Cubans, \$3 for foreigners. For most fans, there are no designated seats, just one concrete bowl for everybody, like at a high-school game. There is only one concession area, with a few stands selling sandwiches, popcorn and sodas. There is no beer or even water for sale. Between innings, fans sit and watch and talk. Smoking, of course, is allowed.

On the field, the players warmed up with brown practice balls. Foul or overthrown balls are usually returned from the stands, even during games.

There are no programs or official scorecards to tell the peloteros. No organ music. Between innings, it is salsa and reggaeton. The national anthem is swift, electronic and taped.

A few things look familiar. Some games are broadcast on television (albeit state-run TV). One evening, as I arrived, an attractive female sideline reporter interviewed 23-year-old cleanup hitter and right fielder Yasmani Tomas.

When rain torpedoed that contest, the groundskeepers emerged and tarped only the hitting area and the pitcher's mound—just another example of the scarcity of an impoverished country stuck in the past.

The most remarkable, and pleasing, aspect of attending a Cuban baseball game is the focus of the crowd, which numbered between 10,000 and 20,000. It is as if you had an entire stadium full of seamheads.

In Cuban baseball, the scoreboard offers inning tallies and run, hit and error totals. No batting averages, pitch velocities or fun facts. And it never, ever tells you when to cheer.

And so the gasp that comes with every pitch is because of the pitch. The horns hammer on incessantly during tense parts of the game because of the game. A big hit sparks furious roaring. (With every run, the entire dugout empties to congratulate the scorer.) Even in routine early innings, fans stand up and scream about corner pitches they thought were strikes.

I wandered around a lot, sitting on the concrete steps with Cubans and occasionally in the foreigners section, which is behind the home-plate box seats for sports and Communist party officials. Only the field was brightly lit; the spectators sat in a hazy dim.

Few other Americans were there. U.S. restrictions on travel to Cuba remain strict, though they are loosening. I was there as a journalist.

The young star, the man with the name that buzzed with every baseball conversation I had in Havana and whose talent on the field was blinding, was Tomas. He is 6-feet-1 of thick muscle and fast hands. In the three games I saw, he cracked several extra-base hits, including a line-drive homer to left. The sounds of Tomas's dinger went: cheer, crack, roar.

Impoverished, isolated, beautiful, police-state Cuba is no paradise. There are reasons its people try to leave. Despite their high quality of play, its baseball leagues typically never field foreign players. The pay and conditions are too miserable. But as a fan, I will say this: Its ballgames are about baseball, and I loved that.

On the field, the play was fast, sometimes uneven. After Tomas threw out a runner from deep right—an unworldly 300-foot heave—the Industriales booted an easy double play. In one game, there were seven errors. The balls and infield seemed unusually bouncy.

After one game, I squeezed myself out of the narrow, crammed exits and walked to the parking lot. The players were trickling out a door, still in full uniform. They mingled with the crowd, which, like them, lives mostly on state allowances. Most players earn around \$60 a month, while national stars can make supplements of up to \$500 a month, said Peter Bjarkman, an author and expert on Cuban baseball.

Tomas, who is rumored to be one of the next big targets for major-league teams, emerged. He wore a Cuban national team warm-up jacket over his barrel chest. Somebody called his name. He approached and greeted a band of a half-dozen people. He held the hand of a pretty pregnant girl and chatted, just a big kid after his game.

The 1970s-era team bus honked. The players weeded themselves out of the crowd. As each climbed onto the bus, he high-fived the driver.

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