

From the Boom of Infamy to the Hall of Fame

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Whenever someone does a detailed and objective study of all the ways the revolutionary government slowed down progress in the struggle against racial discrimination in Cuba—creating false expectations among the discriminated by manipulating their real situation and imposing reductionist and dogmatic criteria on the topic—the enormous counterweight of political ideology may finally be definitively established. It has and still does exert a great deal of influence against the good intentions and even against laws destined to find authentic racial equality among all Cubans.

Politics, whose practice in Cuba is restricted by the government's dictates, has decided for over half a century, and with an iron fist, the things go which historians, anthropologists, economists, sociologists and other social science scholars should direct their attention. The same can be said about arts critics and scholars, sports, literature and the information media, the educational system in all areas and at all levels, publishers and printing houses. We are talking about a delirious episode that resulted in a cultural debacle whose consequences cannot even be detailed yet, because the phenomenon is not over.

Nevertheless, as far as Cuba's slave descendants are concerned, it is already possible to irrefutably ascertain that personas, events and whole chapters of history have been erased from collective memory. This disdainful treatment, and the historic marginalization of icons that were a source of pride and inspiration, have been a constant. These injustices are recurring, systematic, and bear all the terrible weight of discrimination, and have caused serious damage, even though one might be able to say—with no small dose of cynicism—that they were not caused by racial but ideological racism.

Nowadays, we are witnessing a kind of marathon in an attempt to rescue a number of historical and sociological issues about which not a word has been said or published for decades. The hurry with which official institutions and scholars are trying to cover up so many shameful lacunae is much too noticeable. It is now common to find new publications in bookstores and receive news about novel events. They may be late, but we are still grateful. It's just the damage is already done and, while it is not irreversible, we will have to wait a long time for the whole mess to be cleared up, at least to whatever degree they are interested in and convenient for them to do so.

One more novelty in this now common trend to try to make amends (which is always controlled by politics, as is everything else), is the soon to take place opening of the Cuban Baseball Hall of Fame. When the high-level functionary from the National Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER) announced this, it seemed curious that he simply said: "It is an old demand that we soon want to make a reality."¹ The truth and what is already well known is that demand was made a reality all the way back in 1939, and that 68 famous ball players (many of them black) had already had their names inscribed there, at the La Tropical stadium, when all of a sudden, in 1961, the revolutionary government abolished professional baseball and by (ideological) extension shrouded our Baseball Hall of Fame with shadows. For more than fifty years, this has prevented new glories to be registered on and lengthen its list of inductees. These glories are unknown to baseball fans on the island today. Thus, more than the realization of an old demand, the reopening (not the inauguration) of this place will be nothing more than an elemental act of justice. Even if the sports authorities are unwilling to accept it, this act may correct a huge political error committed against all Cubans, but particularly to black Cubans, many of who were responsible for some of the greatest professional baseball feats before or after the revolution, and even till the current time.

The contradiction

One would not have to enumerate the details (embarrassing for the civilized world) for that barbaric trend that for so long left a trace of racial discrimination in baseball history, both in the United States (U.S.) and Cuba, although more so in the U.S. As in so many

other examples of this, prejudice against African descendants in baseball is too long a chapter to be forgotten or ignored, even in its mildest form.

In 1961, when the revolutionary government did away with professional baseball, it would have been understandable that one of its reasons be to denounce racial discrimination, even though black players in the United States had been joining whites in the Major Leagues for more than 20 years, something that had been prohibited for more than half a century. Yet, the Cuban League of Professional Baseball had accepted black, U.S. baseball players since the early 1900s, for which reason the Negro Leagues there decided to admit white players, but only Cuban ones, in just reciprocity.

Of course, as we already know, the main argument sustained by the revolutionary government against professional baseball concerned the exploitation of man by man, and his treatment as merchandise, a behavior that lacked human values—according to what was said back then and is still said now. Racial discrimination was only part of it. It was somewhat outdated, exaggerated and ignored, but was always useful for politics, because it was a sensitive subject among Cubans.

Back then, no one noticed (many still do not) how contradictory it was that in abolishing professional baseball and legally denying access to any information about it, the government was keeping Cubans from proving to themselves if its action was really fair and, above all, if it really represented the wishes and interests of most Cubans. When our baseball was controlled totally by the government, it quickly became clear that its players had just changed 'owners' and their large fan base was such that it became impossible to make comparisons between one model and the other



Team Cuba, Champion Amateur Baseball League, 1939

because of the total isolation from professional baseball that was imposed on them.

This is not about insisting on making comparisons, something that is so often done between professional and amateur sports, but rather about corroborating—even succinctly—how unfair the government was with Cuba's players and fans when it imposed its own will on the wishes of the many and prohibited even minimal knowledge about the past so they could judge for themselves the advantages and disadvantages of both systems. This would be particularly true for future generations.

Newer generations of Cuban ball players, no matter how fantastic, would see their families plunged into the worse economic poverty. Any future was attainable only through rhetoric. They at least had the right to know that even before the revolution, Orestes Miñoso, a black Cuban who had worked cutting sugarcane in Matanzas, won \$2400 pesos a month as a star player on a professional Cuban

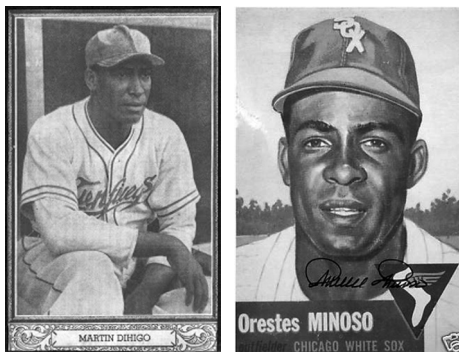
team at a time when anyone who earned \$100 pesos a month could take care of all his basic needs. However, instead of having to remain under humiliating, police surveillance when they traveled abroad, or being prevented from freely expressing their opinions to the press or making even minimal contact with professional players—even if they are relatives—players from the different Cuban, post-revolutionary, amateur teams ought to have the right to get feedback (even technical) about how the sport is played in the Major Leagues, which are the highest expression of baseball. Furthermore, that is not even considering the great dilemma that Cuban ball players have, which is to flee their group (like in slavery times) to try their luck at professional baseball, an innate desire to improve one's self that the new exploiters of men by men who govern Cuba decided to absurdly and erroneously define as a political crime and treason.

Of many, there are only a few examples of the hidden contradiction there is in the

government's supposedly revolutionary and humanistic focus on the exploitation of talent and the individual capabilities of baseball players. This not only very directly and particularly affects black Cubans, given their domination of this sport, but also implies a hiding and manipulation of the history of their virtues as a socio-racial group within a universe that in and of itself has always shown too much resistance to acknowledging their achievements.

Is it possible to justify—particularly with political arguments—that black and *mestizo* Cubans who are baseball fans, and even most players know nothing at all about their history, the names and often even the existence of dozens of men like them who due to their brilliance in the U.S. Major Leagues have been veritable idols on the global level? What right (legal or natural) does a government—no matter how revolutionary it thinks itself—have to deprive Cuban fans in their entirety and especially blacks and *mestizos* of the pride that would come in knowing that many members of their own group were international idols who by dint of effort and persistence earned the privilege of being an inspiration and model for hundreds of thousands of admirers for a large part of the global population?

Martín Dihigo, Atanasio Rigal Pérez (renamed by history as Tani), José de la Caridad Méndez (the Black Diamond) and Cristóbal Torriente are four Cuban baseball players (all of them black) who are in the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, in the United States, a place that is like Olympus for baseball players. It would be exhausting to name the long list of unsavory and discriminatory injustices they had to face throughout their professional careers. The simply scandalous contradiction in this is that except for Dihigo,



Martín Dihigo and Orestes Miñoso

justly known as The Immortal, whose name is at least somewhat known by many island fans, is that hardly anyone knows any of the others. One could count on one hand the fans in Cuba who are able to identify them in photographs. Many have never heard their names mentioned. Moreover, that is not even taking into account the general ignorance there is about their baseball feats. In 1977, 2000 and 2006 (for Méndez and Torriente), these four giants were inducted into the Hall of Fame. Anyone who minimally tries to find news about this in the official Cuban media, using the international headlines as a source for dates, is wasting his or her time.

Another example of a great contradiction between the government's rhetoric and action regarding these matters is documented in Roberto González Echevarría's book *La Gloria de Cuba* [a translation of *The Glory of Cuba*]. A professor at Yale, he states in it: "The propagandistic compendium *Viva y en juego*, a history of Cuban baseball published by the regime, says nothing about professional baseball, except to qualify it as "baseball for hire." Yet, upon exalting amateur baseball, it tries to tie to the pre-revolutionary Amateur League, which practiced apartheid. When it disdains the Cuban League, it condemns to oblivion great, Cuban stars who could not af-

ford the luxury of playing as amateurs. This book, written by white Cubans, is a last blow by the Amateur League and its racist policies. The National Sports Museum, in the Plaza de la Revolución, is also omitted from this book. With the exception of Martín Dihigo, the feats of the great black players in Cuba who played as professionals or semiprofessionals are nowhere to be found. However, there is a display of some of the Amateur World Series uniforms from the 1940s. Sponsored by Batista, the teams that played in these were almost exclusively white” (579).

From Infamy to Fame

ETECSA, the State office that monopolized communications in Cuba, has begun to offer a new SMS messenger service. For the first time in more than fifty years people can have access—in Cuba—to information about the professional baseball’s Major Leagues in the United States. Of course, the vast majority of the population in Cuba cannot afford this service, which one must pay for in convertible currency. Perhaps someone ironic wants to see in this novelty another effort on the part of the government to vindicate itself. Major League games from the United States have never been televised on Cuban television for even a moment. What is symptomatic is that this official dislike of professionalism does not seem to be the cause of endless prohibition—at least in recent years. Other sports within the very same system have been unblocked on Cuban television, particularly professional soccer, whose last world championship was seen by Cubans—play by play—in the most central and popular locations in Havana. It was good news for all Cubans, no doubt. However, the bad and unjust thing continues to be that professional baseball, a

major passion for most on the island, has not yet received even the most minimal coverage.

Then, what is even worse for the national sport, the avalanche of soccer as a spectator sport on Cuban television screens is happening at the same time as an evident decline in the quality of our own baseball. This may explain why young and old fans alike are worried about the fact that the youngest generations of Cubans are changing their sports idols. Whereas before they talked about Agustín Marquetti, Arturo Linares, Antonio Muñoz, Luis Giraldo Casanova or Braudilio Vinent, among other stars from the national amateur leagues, today they speak of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Just as we used to see kids and adolescents playing baseball on Havana’s streets, today we see them playing soccer.

In any event, what is worrisome should not be that soccer gains ground with Cuban fans, but that the cause for this hurts the traditional Cuban preference for baseball, especially when this cause is conditioned by politics. In fact, I wouldn’t doubt that even the government is worried about this, particularly because it cannot win medals and prestige for its ideological propaganda since Cuba does not have the talent in soccer as it does in baseball.

What is definitely highly doubtful is that someday the revolutionary government opens up access to the spectacle of professional baseball for our Cuban fans. If it didn’t do so before due to a simple fear of the players and fans being able to corroborate the technical superiority and better living conditions that its players enjoyed—whether they were black or white—when compared to our amateurs, who today have extra reasons not to do so. One of many reasons would be the possibility of seeing many of our national idols wearing the brilliant, professional uniforms, who

desperate due to their persistent poverty and political harassment, decide to leave, risking their lives in doing so.

Nevertheless, there are many testimonies by these Cuban players abroad about how much they would like to share with the compatriots the triumphs of professionalism. We know of Tony Oliva, a black Cuban from Pinar del Río, who had to escape Cuba with a false passport, and in the U.S. managed to break almost all of professional baseball's offensive records. Yet, he has been perennially saddened almost all his life because he is not able to share each one of his feats with his Cuban public. Even better known is the case of Orlando "El Duque" Hernández, who as a pitcher for the Yankees of New York, still considered himself to a pitcher with the Industriales, an amateur team in Havana, and in the debt of his Cuban fans. This is a case that everyone talks about all the time.

The story of this other descendant of slaves and baseball virtuoso, one of the best pitchers in the history of post-revolutionary baseball, one could easily make a combination horror-mystery film. When the sports authorities suspected that El Duque was tempted by the idea of playing as a professional, they suspended him. He was no longer able to play and additionally subjected to permanent po-

lice harassment. It seems the official intention, macabre as can be, was to keep him inactive for the most time possible. Since he was 32 at the time, their purpose was for time to pass, so that he could not get professional training, if he ever could have. El Duque was almost pushed to try to leave Cuba on a shaky raft, a truly suicidal idea. He could have died trying (as has happened to thousands), but in December 1997, he reached the U.S. coast. The rest is history, which has been glorious for him, frustrating for his Cuban fans, and shameful for the revolutionary government.

Is it possible that with the inauguration of this new place, the sports authorities will be able to return to Cuban blacks and *mestizos* all that pride, all those examples of valor, willpower and confronting racism they hid for decades, which those very same authorities condemned to oblivion along with all the achievements of their baseball idols?

Notes:

- 1-*Trabajadores* (December 24, 2012), directed by Raynaldo González Villalonga, a member of the National Commission of Sports Historians.
- 2-González Echevarría, Roberto. *La Gloria de Cuba* (Madrid: Editorial Colibrí, 1999): 579.