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Baseball and Revolution

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 has been with baseball in Cuba. So many controversies have surrounded the Cuban Revolution that few have taken notice or given serious thought to this phenomenon. To many, I suppose, it is a slightly humorous topic, frivolous by comparison to many painful ones concerning Cuba. To others, perhaps, it is evidence of the Maximum Leader's youthful, unaffected spirit. But because of the historical depth and relevance of baseball in Cuban culture and history, the commander in chief's relationship to the national sport is no trivial matter. Fidel Castro's role in the sport during the revolutionary period is necessarily an important subject. In a sense it defines baseball in Cuba from 1959 until today, a span as long as the era from the turn of the century to the Amateur World Series and the revival of the Cuban League in the early forties.

Given the inordinate length of Fidel Castro's tenure in power, it is impossible to find even a close second in this aspect of his performance, and only the most ludicrous hypothetical comparisons come to mind. It is, for instance, as if Franco had been deeply and visibly committed to the fate of bullfighting in Spain throughout his long rule and donned the *traje de luces* once in a while to try a few passes. I am not aware if Perón attended

soccer matches in Argentina, or if Pérez Jiménez followed the fates of the Venezuelan Olympic teams. Somoza did take over the reigns of the Nicaraguan national team in an Amateur World Series being held in Managua, but the popularity of the sport in that country cannot compare to Cuba's, and Somoza was not in power as long as Fidel Castro. Moreover, neither soccer in Argentina, Olympic sports in Venezuela nor baseball in Nicaragua have developed in relation to a nearby political and cultural power such as the United States and an organization like organized baseball. The Maximum Leader's sports craze is itself a product of U.S. influence, unimaginable in less modern Latin American countries, tied to Spanish or European images of political deportment.

One thing appears to be clear: Cuban national, cultural, and political identities can only be carved out of their involvement with the United States. All the paeans to the Soviet Union in the recent past, to the sister countries of the Communist block, to the Third World, and to Latin America were largely propaganda. They never truly reflected the people's feelings. The focus of Cuba's attention is the mighty neighbor to the north, where one-tenth of its population has wound up in spite of punitive travel restrictions. The process through which national and political identity are defined on the island is a complex mixture of admiration for and rejection of the United States. Modern Cuba's identity was forged in the second half of the nineteenth century, just as baseball was being incorporated into the future country's culture. Baseball was present at the birth of the nation. A Cuba conceived during the sports-minded belle époque had to include play, physical prowess, and the arts as essential components of nationhood. It is for all these reasons that the commander in chief wears not only his olive green military hat but symbolically a baseball cap as well. He embodies the nation, and with it the martial yet ludic physical spirit of sport. The interlocking order of a game's rules projects a sense of stability as a method of shaping future events. A manager calling for a steal to stay out of a double play is like a general planning a battle. The implication of military leaders in sports earlier in Cuban history, from Machado to Batista, were only harbingers of what would come after 1959.

Fidel Castro's involvement in the last gasps of professional baseball were related earlier, as well as his performance with the Barbudos team in whose uniform he appeared in well-publicized pictures. But this was nothing compared to his participation in the game later. He has been invariably present to throw out the ceremonial first pitch in national competition and in international contests held in Cuba. But sometimes this was not enough. *Cuba Internacional* (March 1965) reported that the final game of the National Series drew 32,470 fans to the Stadium Latinoamericano—as the Gran Stadium was now called—and that the first pitch was thrown by Germán Lairet, representative in Cuba of the Venezuelan Liberation Forces (the regime was promoting revolution in the rest of Latin America then), whereupon Fidel Castro took the mound and pitched to the first batter of

the game! It was not reported if the at-bat counted or if the Maximum Leader got into the books with his performance. Pedro Chávez, an early star of post-1959 baseball, reminisced in 1984 about how Fidel Castro would stay after games of the National Series to play a few innings with the guys, something they deeply appreciated (*Bohemia*, October 12). In August 1964 *Cuba Internacional* ran a graphic report on Fidel Castro's participation, as pitcher, in two games, one at Latinoamericano. In Camagüey he pitched for that province's team against Pinar del Río's, not allowing a hit for seven innings (were the hitters *really* trying?). After the game he sat on the grass with the players to lecture them on the regime's plans for sports. This paternalistic supervision and participation was also demonstrated by rewards from the *Comandante* after a great performance, or words of praise and encouragement as a team left for or returned from international play.

I find most Americans incredulous when I tell them that baseball is Cuba's *national* game. Those who know something about baseball are aware that the game is popular in Cuba, but the idea of holding in common the national game with a country with which the United States broke diplomatic relations years ago seems bizarre. It is like sharing intimate family habits and rituals with a stranger. How can two countries jointly hold something that is part of the unique essence of nationhood? Again, how can a game define a nation? How can the national game of the threatening imperial power also define the Cuban nation? This contradiction did not escape everyone in Cuba at the beginning of the revolution, and indeed some measures were taken to increase the country's commitment to soccer. But this did not succeed. Soccer had been rejected in the thirties in a fit of xenophobia against Spaniards, still viewed by Cubans as backward and out of step with the modern. Baseball was Cuban because it was modern and because it was shared with the Americans, not with the crass Spaniards.

To the revolutionaries the notion of beating the United States at its own game became a cherished dream, even if it meant perpetuating an undeniable American influence.[1] To common people the game was too deeply ingrained in everything a boy learned as soon as he was able to socialize and satisfy the need to play, to be easily abandoned. Memories of past games, even local or provincial, were too profound and could not be erased. So the decision had to be made very soon after 1959 to continue Cuba's commitment to baseball. It was in fact expanded to bring about something that many Cubans seemed to have wanted for a long time: a national championship that involved all regions of the island and that also broke down the racial apartheid of amateur baseball. To tie all this to the forging of a new sense of national identity, invested in the revolutionary government and its leaders, was a consciously followed plan that met with great success in many areas, but not without the same cost to human freedom and individual self-determination as in all other aspects of Cuban life.

To reshape baseball was a difficult task because the edifice of tradition had to be demolished and carefully rebuilt. In 1959, Cuban baseball memory reached back to the turn of the century and included mostly revered figures who had shined in the professional ranks, except for the few whites whose major exploits had come in the Amateur League. Méndez, Torriente, Dihigo, Salazar, Tiant, Luque, Miguel Angel González, Bragaña, Silvio García, Chacón, Mayor, and Miñoso were associated with Habana, Almendares, Cienfuegos, Marianao, Santa Clara, and Fe, all the great teams in the Cuban League. Older fans could still remember the Cuban Stars—both editions—and their legendary journeys through American independent baseball. Younger ones cherished Miñoso's triumphs with the Cleveland Indians and the Chicago White Sox, and all savored Amorós' decisive catch in the 1955 World Series, which brought victory to the beloved Brooklyn Dodgers, who had trained often in Cuba. It was easy to dismiss and deride the history of the Cuban Republic, but it was hard to erase these deep-seated memories, filled with pleasure, attached to longings for the innocence of childhood, and intertwined with one's link to family traditions. Many Cubans had in their heads a better idea of baseball's chronology than of Cuba's history.[2]

When Almendares and Cienfuegos played the final game of the 1960–61 season it was obvious to people running the Cuban League that there would not be a championship the next year. I do not think that anyone thought that professional baseball as it was known in Cuba was finished for good. As with everything else, changes appeared to be provisional, soon to be reversed when the new regime collapsed or was forced to correct its policies drastically. The revolutionaries were improvising under pressure. Most of those (of us) who left early believed that normalcy would return in the not too distant future, and with it Habana, Almendares, Cienfuegos, and Marianao. But the revolutionary leaders had other plans, and in February 1961 the INDER (Instituto Nacional de Deportes Educación Fisica y Recreación) was created. In March it decreed the abolition of professional baseball, and plans to hold a national amateur championship were laid out. By pure chance, an Amateur World Series was slated for Costa Rica in April 1961. This was to be number XV for this event, though none had taken place since 1953, and the tournament had long lost the prestige it had in the forties. The Cuban Olympic Committee, headed by Manuel González Guerra, hastily organized massive tryouts, out of which a powerful team emerged. It plowed through the competition in San José at the same time as the revolutionary forces were repulsing the Bay of Pigs invasion back home. The connections between the two victories were not lost, and the bond between baseball and the defense of the motherland was strengthened. The idea of rewriting Cuban baseball history by connecting the present to the glory years of the Amateur League and the World Series held at La Tropical began to take shape. But if professional baseball was finished in Cuba, certainly not professional baseball played by Cubans.

Paradoxically, even though after 1961 the legal flow of Cuban players to organized baseball was cut, there were more Cuban stars and greater achievements by Cubans in the majors after 1959 than ever before. In the sixties, Calvin Griffith's and Joe Cambria's dream of fielding a winning team stocked with Cuban players finally came to fruition. In 1965, at long last, the Senators won a pennant led by Cuban stars, only they did so as the Minnesota Twins, with Tony Oliva, Zoilo Versalles, Camilo Pascual, and Hilario (Sandy) Valdespino on their roster. Pascual had become one the premier pitchers in the majors, and Versalles won the Most Valuable Player award that year. Pascual, Versalles, and Oliva were bona fide stars. Oliva won a Rookie of the Year award and three batting titles in his career. He was the first Cuban batting champion in the majors—indeed, the only one so far. Versalles, an aggressive, inspirational player, became one of the best shortstops in all of baseball; he was a good fielder who could hit with power.

The diaspora that began as the curtain came down on the Cuban League in February 1961 included many players on major-league rosters as well as others who were about to make them. Players who had begun their careers in the fifties enjoyed good seasons in the sixties and seventies. Tony (El Haitiano) González had a few good years with the Phillies and the Braves. Francisco (Panchón) Herrera did not quite live up to his promise with the Phillies, but had a few bright moments. Orlando Peña became a notable reliever for several teams, and Miguel (Mike) Cuéllar turned into one of the dominant lefties of the seventies and the cowinner of a Cy Young Award in 1969, the only one ever by a Cuban. An early defector from a Cuban national team, Dagoberto Campaneris (*né* Campanería), became one of the greatest base stealers in the majors while playing for the Oakland A's. He was one of the best shortstops in recent years, and performed memorably in the World Series. Marcelino López, a strapping black lefty who also left Cuba in the sixties, had some good seasons for the Phillies and other clubs. And Atanasio (Tony) Pérez, first baseman for the Cincinnati Big Red Machine of the seventies, made several all-star teams and is considered by many to have had a Hall of Fame career. Meanwhile, Luis Tiant, following in the footsteps of his famous father and going far beyond him, reached stardom with the Indians, Red Sox, and Yankees, and pitched some unforgettable World Series games.

There were quite a few other Cuban players with notable careers in the seventies, eighties, and nineties. Two, Hiraldo Sablón Ruiz (Chico Ruiz), a reserve infielder with Cincinnati and other clubs, and Minervino (Minnie) Rojas, a very good reliever with the Angels, were involved in terrible automobile accidents. Ruiz was killed and Rojas was paralyzed. Both had enjoyed good years, with Ruiz becoming one of the most effective

pinch hitters in the business. Joaquín (Joe) Azcúe caught with distinction for the Cleveland Indians, as did Paulino (Paul) Casanova for the Pirates and the new Senators. A native of Banagüises, Casanova was another Matanzas-area product. Octavio (Cookie) Rojas had an outstanding career as an all-around player for the Phillies and other teams, and managed the Angels in 1988. He was the third Cuban to manage in the majors. Miguel Angel González had managed the Cardinals in 1938 and 1940, and Preston Gómez, one of Cambria's signees in the forties, managed the Padres, Astros, and the Cubs in the sixties, seventies, and early eighties. The fourth was Tony Pérez, who managed the Cincinnati Reds all too briefly in 1993.

Camilo Pascual was the last Cuban star to record great performances in both the majors and the Cuban League. He pitched last for the Indians in 1971, having completed a magnificent career that would have yielded even better statistics if he had not spent most of it with the lowly Washington Senators. He told me in Miami that his best season was 1959, when he won 17 for the Senators, not his 20-game seasons (1962 and 1963) with the Twins, which were a much better team. Winning for the Senators in the fifties was an achievement. Miñoso was really through by 1964; his plate appearances in 1976 and 1980 were gimmicks. The major-league stars of the post-1959 era were Oliva, Pérez, and Tiant. Only Tiant had a season in the Cuban League; the others never played in it. Yet these three, and younger stars of the eighties and nineties, José Canseco and Rafael Palmeiro, had better verifiable records than any Cuban player before, including the biggest names, such as Méndez, Torriente, Luque, Dihigo, and Miñoso.

Tony Oliva was one of Cambria's last finds. He was born Pedro Oliva, but only managed to get out of Cuba using a brother's passport, becoming forever Tony. A tall, lanky, left-handed hitter from Pinar del Río, in western Cuba, Oliva hit out of a crouch reminiscent of Stan Musial. Like him, Oliva was a deadly line-drive hitter who hit to all fields with power. He finished with 220 home runs, 34 more than Miñoso. After burning up minor-league pitching, Oliva joined the Twins in 1964 and led the American League in batting with a .323 average, hits (217), runs (109), and doubles (43). He also clouted 32 home runs and was named Rookie of the Year. He won the batting title again the next year, with a .321 average, and a third one in 1971, with a .337 mark. Were Torriente, Dihigo, or Silvio García as good batters? There is no reason to doubt that they could have been, but there are no records to prove it. Before his time, Oliva's only competition among the Cubans was Miñoso, and he bested him in every important category, including fielding (Oliva won a Gold Glove in 1966), except stolen bases and charisma. Oliva was not a flamboyant speedster like Miñoso and did not go for big cars. But his greatest lack was a country to revel in his glory and an adoring Cuban public to promote his virtues. One can only imagine what a prerevolutionary Cuba would have made of a three-time major-league batting champion. Though a respected and

admired player in the United States, Oliva was not an American, and, given his quiet demeanor, did not fit or play up to any of the stereotypes of a Latin player, as others, such as Tiant, did.

Another demure star was Tony Pérez. Until Canseco, Pérez was the greatest Cuban home-run hitter in the history of the majors. He was the first Cuban to reach 40 homers in a season, and he finished with 379. Canseco has reached 40 three times, hit 47 in 1998, and has surpassed Pérez's total. But where Pérez is unreachable is in the RBI department, where his 1,652 is a Hall of Fame figure. Canseco has had several outstanding seasons in this category and could conceivably catch Pérez, but it is unlikely. Pérez was a steady, reliable performer, with a good glove at third and first, and a team player. Like Oliva, he was missing a country to celebrate him, though he did make a home in Puerto Rico, where he played ten seasons in winter competition. Was he better than the "Inmortal" Dihigo at the plate? Pérez finished with a lifetime average in the high .270s. Dihigo hit .311 in eleven seasons in the Mexican League, with 55 homers. Pérez hit far more homers, and all of them against major-league competition. But because he excelled before Cuban fans in Cuba, Dihigo will forever enjoy a higher place in Cuban baseball lore, and many if not most Cubans on the island have never heard of Pérez. It is also true that Dihigo was, in addition, an outstanding pitcher, perhaps his best position.

Luis Tiant managed to get in one season, the last, in the Cuban League, where he was outstanding. But he quickly left for Mexico, where he picked up where he had left off, married, and was probably going to settle there, as had so many black Cuban players in the past. But he was signed by the Cleveland Indians and went on to have a tremendous career in the majors. Older Cubans would always compare Tiant to his father, but they were completely different pitchers. The older Tiant was a slender lefthander with some speed and much guile and control, not to mention an uncannily deceptive pickoff move. It is not true that he had a bizarre pitching motion that his son may have copied or inherited. Young Tiant was born too late to see his father play. The younger Tiant was a stocky, fireballing right-hander until he hurt his arm. He then became the sneaky, head-jerking, and twisting hurler notorious for his craftiness. Tiant had superb years as both kinds of pitcher, though he will always be remembered as the eccentric kind. He won twenty or more games four times, the only Cuban to do so, and he is the only Cuban pitcher to have won more than 200 games in the majors (229). He had memorable performances in the 1975 World Series pitching for the Red Sox. Was Tiant a better pitcher than his father, or better than Dihigo, Bragaña, or Marrero? Because of the anomalies, the comparison is not possible. Marrero did not reach the majors until he was in his forties, and old Tiant, Dihigo, and Bragaña starred in the Negro Leagues, Mexico, and Cuba. Tiant's real competition among contemporary Cubans is Pascual, who won fewer games (174), but pitched for lesser teams. Having seen them both perform and studied their records,

I believe that Pascual was the better of the two. Was Luque better? Probably. The Pride of Havana won 194 major-league games.

Of these postrevolutionary stars, Tiant was the one to acquire the most fame. Pascual and Oliva had very brief postseason exposure, compared to Pérez and Tiant. The two Twins played in a small market, away from media centers such as Boston and New York, where Tiant performed. But in addition, Tiant played up to some of the stereotypes of a Latin player and wound up with the ridiculous moniker of El Tiante in pig Spanish. He was often pictured smoking a postgame cigar, and much was made of his age, a common source of mirth in the media concerning Latin and black players, who often play longer because there are seldom jobs awaiting them in baseball or other fields. Oliva has had a long career managing in Mexico, and Tiant has recently been hired by the Dodgers as a roving pitching coach. Some Cuban players opened baseball academies in the Miami area.[3] Be that as it may, the figure of a very black Tiant sunk in a whirlpool of very white foam with a huge stogie sticking out of his smiling face became a cliché that carried into an inane biography of his published under the inevitable title *El Tiante.*

These players, who had every right to enter Cuban baseball lore, missed out. Few fans with living memories of the greats from yesteryear were able to see them in action to make comparisons and thereby to enshrine them in the constant debate that makes up baseball oral history. There was no Cuban baseball in the old sense to receive them. This is a great loss, not the greatest caused by exile and the diaspora, but a sensitive one nonetheless, as when a family loses all its picture albums in a fire. José Cardenal, who never did play at Gran Stadium, once told me that he would have given anything to have had one at-bat in the Cuban League. His career in the majors was good, lengthy, and has now been extended as first-base coach of the Yankees. But because he remembered Cuban baseball, it is not enough.[4]

Those who came next had no memory of it, but the records of two of them compare very favorably with those of Cubans in the past. Canseco and Palmeiro were both born in Havana, but came to the United States as babies. They are Miami Cubans, or Cuban Americans, who developed as ballplayers in this country. The left-handed-hitting Palmeiro, a first baseman, hit .415 with 29 home runs and 94 RBIs at Mississippi State in 1984, the only Triple Crown winner in the Southeastern Conference. By 1986 he was with the Chicago Cubs, where he began a career of great brilliance that already includes well over 200 home runs, close to 1,000 RBIs, and a lifetime average of about .300. Palmeiro is challenging Pérez as the best Cuban-born first baseman ever and could catch up with him in many offensive categories. And then there is the irrepressible José Canseco, a strapping right-handed-hitting outfielder with astonishing power and explosive speed on the bases. Canseco's 1988 season has to be the best ever by a Cuban: He clouted 42 homers, hit for an average of .307, drove in 124 to

lead the American League, and stole 40 bases, the only man in baseball history to have had more than 40 home runs and 40 stolen bases in one season. Some of the homers were of the tape-measure variety. Like Palmeiro, Canseco is also closing in on Tony Pérez's numbers. But Canseco's combination of power, average, and speed probably makes him the best Cuban baseball player ever—may I be forgiven by Dihigo, Torriente, Oms, and Pérez.

Because of his off-the-field antics, flamboyance, and immaturity, older Cubans have not always warmed up to Canseco, in spite of his epic exploits. In Cuba itself, broadcaster Eddy Martin told me, he is known as *el pesado* (the boor). When I asked Fausto Miranda, the dean of Cuban sportswriters, if he thought Canseco was the best Cuban ever, he twisted his face in a gesture of acute anguish and intoned: "Roberto, he has the body of a superman but the brain of a baby!" Still, the same could be said about Babe Ruth, and Torriente was a pitiful alcoholic. Camilo Pascual, who signed Canseco out of high school for the Oakland A's, told me that Tony Oliva, not Canseco, was the greatest Cuban hitter who ever lived. Who am I to argue with Pascual? But the numbers do not bear him out. While Canseco does not have Oliva's batting titles and has hit for an average a least thirty points below his left-handed compatriot, he has more homers and RBIs. One could say that a Canseco with Oliva's level head could have accomplished more, but as a physical specimen, the big baby has no peer. I think that older Cubans—including Miranda and Pascual—downgrade Canseco because, as a ballplayer, he is not really Cuban by development and has no memory of Cuban baseball lore. The same applies to Palmeiro, a typical American collegiate star who has excelled in the majors.

There are a few others, with lesser accomplishments, such as huge, switch-hitting first baseman Orestes Destrade, who spent several years in Japan. Except for a 20-homer season with the Marlins, he has struggled in the majors. He came from Cuba at age six and grew up in Miami. Left-handed relief specialist Tony Fossas is a Havana native who did not reach the majors until he was in his thirties. He has stuck in the majors because of his ability to dominate left-handed hitters in tough situations with guile and curves.

After these come the defectors and the American-born children of Cubans, among them those of Cuban ballplayers. I will deal with the former in a later section, and mention the latter briefly here to conclude this one.

There are some eye-catching names in the majors these days, particularly on the Phillies' roster. The most prominent is Danny Tartabull, the son of José. Danny is a slugger who has had excellent seasons with the White Sox, lesser ones with the Yankees, and sho seems to be winding down his career. Another is Rubén Amaro, an outfielder who is the son of Rubén Amaro and therefore the grandson of Santos Amaro. The first Rubén was born in Mexico and the second in Philadelphia. Neither can compare with the old man, who was bigger, hit for average and power, and had a rifle

arm. Yet another is catcher Bobby Estalella, the grandson of Roberto (El Tarzán) Estalella. Seattle has David Seguí, a first baseman who hits from both sides and is the son of pitcher Diego Seguí, who had a substantial career in the majors and played in the final season of the Cuban League. Tony Pérez's son Eduardo, a strapping right-handed hitter like his father, has been struggling in the majors. He was born in Cincinnati. The last father-son combination of native-born Cubans, as we saw, was completed when Aurelio Monteagudo made the Kansas City Athletics in 1963 (the pitcher put up modest numbers for seven years). He was the son of 1938 Senator recruit René Monteagudo. Both had identical 3 and 7 records in the majors.

Alex González, the current Toronto shortstop, is the son of Cuban parents, as is Fernando Viña, the Brewers' second baseman. Alex Fernández, an accomplished right-hander for the Florida Marlins, was born in Miami. So was Alex Ochoa, the powerful outfielder for the New York Mets. There are probably many others. With so many Spanish surnames in the majors today it is difficult to tell, and given the spread of the Cuban population, it has become even more so. Alex González was born in Miami, a good clue, but Viña was born in Sacramento, California. I thought, at first, that he was a Chicano. Given the length of our exile, there could be grandsons of Cubans in the majors. How far to count? The new Cubans on big-league teams today are the defectors, who bring with them a new Cuban baseball lore.[5]

Cuban government publications call baseball after 1959 "revolutionary baseball," to distinguish it from that of previous eras, but I will opt for "postrevolutionary baseball" so as not to imply that the game itself has been transformed in any significant way beyond its organization and role in society. But there is no denying that these changes in themselves have been revolutionary. The first was, of course, the abolition of the Cuban League, which together with severe travel restrictions, attempted to deny all Cubans the opportunity to play professional baseball. The glossy magazine *Cuba*, a clone of *Soviet Life*, published the following statement of the party line concerning the abolition of professional baseball whose directness and succinctness I cannot improve upon:

> In 1961 Cuba eradicated the practice of professional baseball, considering it a form of the exploitation of man by man: Athletes were sold or traded like simple merchandise. Many critics were bold enough to predict the noisy collapse of baseball, thinking that once the material incentive was removed, enthusiasm and love for the game would disappear. It is evident that professionalism in sports is the product of a society in which young men without means and the chance to attain a certain cultural or technical level that would allow them to live normally, take recourse to their physical strength and ability in a given sport with the hope of excelling and thereby securing for a few years their subsistence [*Cuba*, December 1969, p. 17].

The issue of whether professional baseball was or is a form of exploitation of man by man, whereas the game now played under the system in Cuba is not, remains open for debate. But the radical change brought about in the game by the revolution and the relentless propaganda about its benefits in the Cuban press and other publications force me to draw a comparison.

There are several areas in which the advantages brought about by the revolution are undeniable. Perhaps the first has to do with the game itself. Baseball in Cuba is free from all the hoopla surrounding the actual contests in the majors and minors in the United States, where the game seems to be a pretext for a spectacle designed to entertain the fans and keep them consuming all the products sold at the stadiums. Discrimination in amateur baseball was abolished, though one might observe that until 1997 no black had ever been named manager of the Cuban national team, and that the sports bureaucracy in general gets whiter as one moves up the pyramid, as is the case with the regime itself. (Since 1997 the manager has been former second baseman Alfonso Urquiola, a mulatto) The game was effectively expanded to all areas of Cuba, including the Isle of Pines (now known as Isla de la Juventud), and stadiums were built to accommodate the new teams. A centralized, nationwide circuit, which includes minor leagues (or *ligas de desarrollo*), provides entertainment and participation everywhere. The production of baseball equipment in Cuba itself (Batos is the trademark) makes it more readily available because it is less costly than the imported kind.

The Cuban baseball calendar is quite crowded. The Serie Nacional plays from October to May, concomitantly with the *ligas de desarrollo*, in which each major team keeps a full roster of reserves who play a full schedule in uniforms that, but for a patch, are the same as those of the main club. The National Series consists of sixty-five games, whereas the Selective Series is forty-five. However, as the Selective Series is played, the circuits involving municipal teams start. Players not chosen for the Selective Series thus return home to begin again their quest to make their provincial team. Seasons overlap, and players perform the entire year whether they make the final four or not. Those who do, of course, receive the most attention and eventually compete for the Holy Grail of the Cuban national team and travel abroad.

The Gran Stadium was renamed Latinoamericano, and new, modern stands were built around the outfield in 1971 to increase its capacity to fifty-five thousand. Other parks built around the island, some with capacity for more than twenty thousand, are the following: Guillermón Moncada in Santiago de Cuba; Cándido González in Camagüey; Augusto César Sandino in Santa Clara; Victoria de Girón in Matanzas; Capitán San Luis in Pinar del Río, and Nguyen Van Troi in Guantánamo. Near Havana a new park was built in Bauta, another in Guanabacoa, and yet another at the Psychiatric Hospital in Mazorra (which used to field an amateur team called Los Dementes before 1959). There are others on Isla de la Juventud and

in other localities. Except for a new park built in Morón, Camagüey Province, in the fifties, and another at the Ciudad Deportiva in Havana, Cuba did not have an array of baseball parks of this quality before the revolution. The benefits of other developments are more debatable.

The abolition of professionalism has prevented many Cuban young men from the anguish of years of toil in the American minor leagues, at meager pay, only to be frustrated in their aspirations to make a major-league team. This happens to many Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, as it did to many Cubans before 1959. At the same time, however, by abolishing the Cuban League and making it treasonous to leave the island to play elsewhere, many likely Cuban stars have been prevented from competing against the best in the world and realizing their earning potential. Without the Cuban League, fans have been denied the pleasure of seeing their best players compete against their budding American counterparts, thereby honing their talents further. For every defector there might be ten other players who have yearned to leave but have not done so because of the stigma attached to it, and because to do so would mean to abandon their country forever, not to mention their families, from whom they would be separated, probably for good. The very notion of "defection," which really implies "desertion," as from the military, to indicate an individual's choice of where to live and play, is abhorrent to me. This term expresses the totalitarian nature of the Cuban regime, which conceives of the nation as an army led by the Maximum Leader, to whom absolute fealty is due. The vigilance exercised over the players and the control of their lives turn participation in sports into a form of conscription. I continue to write "defector" for the sake of expediency, but the reader should be aware that I use the word without the implications of cowardice and treason given to it by the Cuban regime. On the contrary, in many cases the players who left their country did this at great peril and endured much anguish and suffering, as the recent flight of Orlando (El Duque) Hernández in a flimsy boat demonstrates.

The eradication of professionalism may have wiped out whatever corruption the system bred, be it in the form of illicit payments to players or, in the larger scheme of things, the Cuban game's subservience to organized baseball. But this benefit is mitigated if one considers that Cuba's sports authority is part of a self-perpetuating bureaucracy and has been in power for nearly forty years without being held accountable by the people of Cuba, whom it often invokes as its beneficiary; hence it is a broader, more pervasive, and more insidious form of corruption. Given the control of the press, it is difficult to know what really goes on in Cuban baseball, although one hears and even reads of players who throw games for payoffs from gamblers, alcoholism among some players, and other common ills of organized sports everywhere. Gambling goes on openly and loudly at the Latinoamericano, as I witnessed on every one of the five or six games I attended between 1995 and 1996. I have been told that it is rampant all over the island.

Of course, the abolition of professionalism did not really take place, if one considers a professional someone who earns emoluments for what he does, and if the perfection of that activity or skill is the most important task in his daily life. Elite baseball players in Cuba—indeed, the better athletes in most sports—are subsidized. The system is corrupted by what is called *licencia deportiva* (sports leave), meaning that one is granted time off from work to practice a sport. But everyone knows that the better athletes do nothing else. The bad faith is patent and is akin to what prevails in American collegiate football. Top Cuban baseball players perform all year (some since they were children in sports academies), receive salaries for their work as well as many special rewards (such as traveling abroad), gain permission to bring goods into the country, are granted stays at expensive hotels along with their families, and are given automobiles. Great performances may be rewarded by "a car as Fidel Castro's gift." In recent times athletes, some of them baseball players, have been able to make substantial amounts of money abroad by playing professionally or by acting as instructors. I was told that retired slugger Agustín Marquetti had made $1,500 a month as an instructor in Japan, and that he, like others who played in that country's industrial leagues, was allowed to bring home all sorts of goods. In a Cuba beset by shortages, these athletes are an elite, sometimes so anointed by their "election" to the Asamblea del Poder Popular, that rubber-stamping body of chosen followers of the regime, a great many of whom hardly ever visit the regions they "represent."

The creation of sports academies gives a chance to a young boy to develop his talents very early by devoting a great deal of his life to the practice of baseball. But this turns the game into a profession at a tender age, does not necessarily ensure proficiency later, and excludes from competition boys who are not as talented. Late bloomers may be left out, as well as others who simply want to play the game, not strive to become a member of the Cuban national team. There are exceptions, to be sure. Osvaldo Fernández, currently with the San Francisco Giants, but a standout with the Cuban national team in the eighties and early nineties, told me recently that he learned the game on his own and made the municipal team and later the provincial team. He is, however, from a remote part of eastern Cuba. But the investment in sports academies belies the propaganda about mass participation and turns boys into professionals exploited more thoroughly than the teenagers signed by major-league teams and sent to baseball academies in the Dominican Republic by major-league teams (a shameful practice in its own right). In my travels to Cuba I have seen precious little baseball played by people of any age outside the pyramid of success described above.

The overarching organization of sports in postrevolutionary Cuba followed the pattern of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. The model was naturally the Soviet one, but is parallel to what was developed in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy during the thirties: the integration of medicine,

physical education, and public health with the goal of creating citizens bodily and mentally prepared to defend the fatherland. Within that structure, the practice of sports in which international play could become an arena for ideological confrontation with capitalist powers was arranged as a funnel of achievement. Competition was designed to cull the best players to constitute the national team, an object of patriotic pride, political loyalty, and worldwide propaganda. All must be well in a society that can produce such splendid athletes. Tournaments and leagues became a series of ever-finer sieves through which the athletes were filtered until only the finest remained. The establishment of sports academies was the foundation of this system, which would identify talent as early as possible in order to cultivate it in the most efficient way, leading up to the national teams.

Children at the elementary-school level who show athletic talent are sent to these academies, whose purpose is to teach them a given sport in the most scientific way, developing their physiques to fit the game in question while also taking care of their education. When asked about this, Jorge Fuentes, manager of the Cuban national team, answered as follows: "In Cuba there are, in all provinces, two athletic institutions. One is introductory and is called Escuela de Iniciación Deportiva Escolar, or EIDE, which goes up to the tenth grade. From the tenth grade to high school *[preuniversitario]* there is the Escuela de Superación y Perfeccionamiento Atlético, ESPA." To Fuentes these academies were "pillars in the athletic development of Cuba." These academies have two sessions, one where the kids get the schooling proper to their grade, and another where they receive "theoretical" instruction in the sport of choice. This is followed by practices, including games against other academies. The process lasts the entire school year. Those who do well in EIDE are moved up to an ESPA, from which they can be integrated into their municipal teams, the National Series, the Selective Series, and so forth until the best group, normally enough for two squads, vies for the national team. They are sent to a sports complex called Cerro Pelado, where they are quarantined during the culmination of training for an international event. Given that there was no experience with baseball in the Soviet bloc, the system had to be adapted to fit the sport, and here the Cuban input, with not a small measure of American influence in training methods and techniques, played a vital role.

In the former Soviet bloc, particularly in East Germany, this system produced athletes who performed with robotlike efficiency: no flair, no creativity. In track and field and some team sports, the results were impressive. But baseball is a game in which athletic conditioning plays a lesser role than in most, and whose training and performance traditions are more artistic than scientific. The kind of lore passed on from one generation of Cuban players to the next about the practice of the sport and the way to be in shape for it differed from the grim, mechanical application of Soviet and East German axioms. Nevertheless, Cuban coaches and managers were given training of that sort, including, of course, sports medicine, physical

education, and strategy. As the men with experience in professional baseball or the Amateur League grew old, the new mentors were trained in the Soviet system, with the unavoidable deviations. Fuentes told me that he had been coaching since age twenty-two, when he was selected along with others for formal instruction. He is an educated, soft-spoken man who ponders everything carefully and never shows emotion. He has been criticized and even lampooned for this. When I told Enrique Núñez Rodríguez, a journalist in his seventies known for his humor, that Fuentes had actually played little, he dismissed him as someone *de laboratorio*, meaning that he was manufactured in a lab. So there is an awareness among older Cubans of the difference in style of play, and many Cuban players continue to perform with a shrewdness that owes more to the lore of the game than to the manuals of the technicians.

The *Béisbol 1968: Guía Oficial*, a statistical summary of the eight National Series, which was the first after a substantial expansion in the number of teams, states quite clearly what the INDER's goals were: "Our highest sports organization has never taken into account attendance or the parity of a tournament, because its greatest interest has always been the development of athletes, and there was no doubt that this expansion would work in favor of the more rapid development of players, as was the case." Though this artificial expansion did not kill interest in the game among the fans, others that followed, inspired by the same objectives, did diminish it. Teams with generic names designating their "selective" status could not possibly be of interest. The system did, however, continue to produce ballplayers, but at the expense of those who slid out of the pyramid of success and whose education was mostly in sports.

But the greatest failure of postrevolutionary baseball comes from what can only be termed an "epic deficiency." It is clear that sports in the modern world take the place of epic deeds, this being the reason why they can be assimilated by a regime or by a political movement in the process of founding a nation. But epic deeds need to be absolute in their greatness, unsurpassed in the strength, skill, and valor of the heroes who perform them. It is clear, of course, that this is an assumed greatness that cannot be verified, as it can in the modern world. Achilles and Hector, Aeneas and Turnus were heroes of unsurpassed accomplishments anywhere in their known universe. No one was better. Together with this was fame. Heroes carried out their epic deeds, and these were sung by the poets, who spread their renown in such a way that they rivaled the gods. In our times, amateur sports rarely can aspire to these heights. There is always the feeling that no matter how great their feats, they cannot possibly compare with those of professionals.

This is particularly so in the case of baseball because of the existence of the major leagues. There have been countless amateurs of seemingly limitless potential who have failed in the majors, when faced with the best in the world on a daily basis. When it comes down to performance it does

not matter if the individual is paid or not; all that is required is that he perform within the rules and limitations of the sport in question. There are some absolutes in the measure of human attainment, particularly in sports and the arts, that exist irrespective of circumstance. Outside of this all other considerations are moral, political, or both, as well as aberrant ones based on race. An athlete or an artist is either the best, among the best, or an "also-ran" soon to be forgotten. The achievements of Cuban baseball players after the revolution are tempered by this epic flaw. Sure, Omar Linares hit three home runs in one game during the 1996 Olympics, but against whom? José de la Caridad Méndez shut out the Cincinnati Reds, and Cristóbal Torriente wore out the best pitching in the American Negro Leagues. Miñoso hit .300 in the American League, and Camilo Pascual won 20 games. I believe that Linares would have shined in the majors, but we will never know if he would have turned out to be another of the countless "bonus babies" on whom fortunes were spent and they flopped. Clint (The Hondo Hurricane) Hartung was expected to be so great that he should have gone directly to the Hall of Fame. But he could not hit major-league pitching, and he also failed as a pitcher.

The question of fame is just as demanding and cruel. The fact is that, for all the importance Cuban authorities wish to attach to baseball amateur tournaments such as the World Cup, the Amateur World Series, the Pan American Games, and even the Olympics, very little attention is paid to them in the rest of the world. In the United States only a minority follows even collegiate baseball, and Team USA is followed by a tiny minority, even if more than fifty thousand showed up to watch Cuba beat them in the Atlanta Olympics. Everyone knows that the best young players are already in the professionals, and that an ordinary Class AA team could beat Team USA on any given day. Regardless of whether it is right or wrong, the fame of amateur baseball players, even the Cubans, is not that widespread. They have left no records against the highest competition. This is not the case in track and field, where the Olympics are the highest form of competition, and someone like Adalberto Juantorena is known to have defeated the best in the world and performed a deed fit for the ages. His accomplishments met the epic requirements.

Even in Cuba, although against the proclaimed collectivist spirit of the political system, local fame is bestowed on some of these athletes. Omar Linares enjoys star status in Cuba, as circumstances allow. But the renown of these luminaries is not as widespread as that of players before 1959. One of the reasons is the lack of press and media coverage. Cuba's press is tightly controlled by the government, which uses it as an instrument of propaganda. Sports are an important component of that propaganda, so it is unlikely that many pungent stories about athletes and games find their way into newspapers and magazines to enhance the aura of players. There is a dearth of publications about sports in comparison to what there was before. Coverage by radio and television is much more plentiful, but no record, or

very little, is left. The lack of commercial advertisements cannot be offset by the political propaganda that uses the athletes but is out of focus except in ideology. The highest form of recognition for an athlete is to appear in the press or television with the Maximum Leader bestowing upon him or her the blessings of the fatherland, because, when all is said and done, in postrevolutionary Cuba there can only be one hero of epic proportions, and he is Fidel Castro. José de la Caridad Méndez, Martín Dihigo, and Roberto Ortiz were greater in the minds of fans than the politicians of their time. But no athlete can equal Fidel Castro, who is treated as if he were the living embodiment of the Cuban nation.

Having said all this, it is undeniable that the reorganization of baseball after 1961, the creation of the National Series, and the durability and expansion of the entire structure through nearly forty years are quite significant accomplishments. Moreover, it would be symmetrically unjust in spirit to deny that the proliferation of teams, the construction of stadiums, the nurturing of rivalries, and the production of players have been sources of recreation and pride to many people in Cuba—if not the people, *el pueblo*, as the regime excessively proclaims. A game is a game, and when people watch, analyze, criticize, and praise the players in the here and now of a contest, very little time is left for sociopolitical reflections or the narcissistic contemplation of the greatness of the fatherland. People express regional loyalties, boast about their players and about how much baseball they know, and put up with the propaganda without really paying much attention to it. It is the same everywhere, as games, because of their mock martial spirit, are absorbed into nationalist propaganda, when they are really rooted in pleasure, and their link to war is a form of symbolic aggressiveness and even sadism, not the expression of the sublime spirit of sacrifice. As we have seen all along in this book, teams have been sponsored by beer manufacturers and tobacco companies, and in the United States, where the flag flutters at every center-field pole and "The Star-Spangled Banner" is sung before each game, a team is boldly called the Brewers. It would be naive to think that all the Cuban players believe revolutionary propaganda, or that they mean it when they claim that they would rather play for the Cuban people and Fidel Castro than for millions of dollars in the majors. All one has to do to be disabused of any such notion is to compare some of the statements made by players before and after they defected. The billboards with revolutionary slogans and the pageants before international competitions are probably as meaningful to most of the athletes as advertising in ballparks elsewhere. Players in organized baseball have been known to mouth pieties about sacrificing for the team and being proud of the city they represent. I suspect that the same rift exists in Cuba between patriotic propaganda and the realities of baseball.

In spite of the break with the past, postrevolutionary baseball profited—as did boxing—from Cuba's living tradition—the veteran players who remained after the initial diaspora. Among those the most influential and prominent were Gilberto Torres, Pedro (Natilla) Jiménez, and Conrado Marrero. Lesser figures, such as Asdrúbal Baró, Juan Vistuer, Juan Delís, Orlando Leroux, Andrés Ayón, Francisco Quicutis, and a few others also played important roles. Fermín Guerra was among the few top figures who remained, but after a brief stint as manager of Occidentales and later Industriales he fell into disfavor and (as he told me in Miami) was sent to Camagüey Province to pick potatoes. He eventually left. Miguel Angel González stayed in Havana, aloof and unmolested until his death in 1977. A curious form of continuity has been that of the ballboys at Gran Stadium. After Faustino (Bicicleta) Zulueta retired, he was replaced by his nephew Teófilo Zulueta, who now sells peanuts at the park. He, in turn, was replaced by the current ballboy, Fernando Padrón. Like Zulueta, fans taunt Padrón, who takes it in stride and seems somewhat disoriented. All the ballboys have been colored, a retention that reaches back to the first Almendares Park.

Yet another link with the previous era is Eddy Martin, the most popular broadcaster of the postrevolutionary period along with Bobby Salamanca (their Americanized names could not be more telling). Martin (*né* Antonio Eduardo Martín Sánchez) worked as a commentator during the last decade of the Cuban League, both broadcasting and conducting interviews with players before the game. He also did commercials for various products. Martin is a well-spoken man with a wealth of information about Cuban baseball. He is a keen analyst of the game and is well informed about major-league baseball. He is very much in the mold of Orlando Sánchez Diago, Felo Ramírez, and Manolo de la Reguera, the principal baseball announcers of prerevolutionary Cuba, with whom he worked and learned. But the key figures in the transformation of Cuban baseball were the former players who remained on the island and managed or coached the new teams.

Gilberto Torres managed the early national team that played in the São Paulo Pan American Games and passed on his vast knowledge of the game to generations of players thereafter. Natilla Jiménez managed the Orientales for three years, did some coaching on the other end of the island, in Pinar del Río, and wound up in Santa Clara, where he managed for six years. He was the pitching coach of the national team in the Amateur World Series of 1969 (Dominican Republic), 1970 (Maracaibo), and 1971 (Cuba), as well as in the 1970 Central American Games in Panama, the 1971 Pan American Games in Cali, Colombia, and several other international competitions.

An October 5, 1984, article in *Bohemia* speaks of Juan Vistuer, a reserve outfielder with Almendares in the 1954 Caribbean Series, who

eventually wore the uniform of all four teams in the Cuban League, mostly Marianao's. After the revolution he became an instructor, studied physical education in the USSR, and returned to Cuba to assist with the new baseball. In this interview he reminisces about Luque and Miguel Angel González with devotion. Asdrúbal Baró, a teammate of Vistuer's in the Cuban League, told me that he had coached in Pinar del Río and Las Villas in the early years of the revolution. Another transitional figure of importance was Pedro Chávez, manager of the Cuban national team in 1984. He played with the Círculo de Artesanos of the old Amateur League beginning in 1956 and was the Triple Crown winner in 1957. Chávez also played in the Liga de Pedro Betancourt before the revolution. In 1961 he was with the World Series champion Cuban national team in Costa Rica, and later won two batting championships in National Series.

Conrado Marrero remained in Cuba (though one of his sons was among the invaders at the Bay of Pigs) and has coached pitching for several teams, among them the Industriales, based in Havana. He has also been a roving instructor. The unflappable premier has on occasion thrown out a ceremonial first pitch, but he makes no political pronouncements and travels often to Miami to visit his sons and grandchildren. The most active among the leading figures of the Great Amateur Era was Juan Ealo, who became a theoretician of the game and even published a manual on how to play it (see the bibliography). Ealo claims that the pitching in his time was better but that hitting is now superior. Espinacas, as he was known in the Amateur League, has been one of the mainstays of postrevolutionary baseball, and clearly among the most influential men in the transition to the game as it is played now in Cuba.

That transition took place at the national level with the organization of the first National Series, which included four teams: Occidentales, Orientales, Habana, and Azucareros. The four-team format was a clear echo of the Cuban League's. By 1962 the team number had increased to six, and a couple of years later to fourteen. Ealo sorts out this history in his book on baseball thus:

> If we take the National and Classifying Series as the ultimate expression of the high quality of our baseball we can appreciate the development attained since the triumph of the revolution. Beginning with a first phase with four teams, the National Series were organized years later with six. Beginning with 1967 twelve teams were included, which represented the champions and an all-star from each of the then six provinces. In the 1974–75 and 1975–76 championships fourteen teams took part in the Classifying Series, which were finally split up into seven teams that participated in the Selective Series and Seven in a Special Series. Beginning with the 1977–78 championship eighteen teams played in the National Series, representing each of the provinces and the special municipality Isla de la Juventud, according to the new politico-administrative organization. Later six teams participated in the Selective Series, representing territories that traditionally belonged to one same province [p. 16].

One of the additional teams was the Industriales, so called because they came into existence at the time Che Guevara, minister of finance, had embarked on the harebrained plan of industrializing Cuba, one of the first economic catastrophes of the new regime. This Havana-based team caught on because, wearing blue, it inherited some of the Almendares fans, whereas the other early Havana team, called Metropolitanos, wore red, like the old Habana Lions. Industriales, whose name also rhymed with Almendares, is still in existence and is probably the team with the largest following in Cuba, while the Metropolitanos have apparently lost their link with the Lions. There is now a third Havana-based team, called Habana-Campo, which represents the rural area of the capital region.

The expansion and repeated reshuffling of teams was obviously intended to spread organized baseball throughout the island and to create regional loyalties. Obviously one of the problems at first was that a team such as Industriales, located in the area of highest population density, would dominate. And it did for the first four or five years. To avoid the concentration of talent in the capital facilities were built in the provinces and rules passed to prevent players from moving to the capital, and strengthen teams there. I was told that players have to play for the team in the area they are from, and that to change residency and play for another team a period of two years has to elapse and permission obtained from local and regional authorities. In this way it is ensured that players such as Víctor Mesa would remain with Las Villas and Omar Linares with Pinar del Río. The system is obviously also designed to sift out the better players to constitute the national team, but the return to a "selective series" involving former traditional regions (the old provinces) shows that, as I was told, fan following declined once Cuba, and baseball with it, abandoned its old division in six provinces to create more than twice that many smaller ones. This expansion, as in organized baseball, must also have diluted the quality of play at the National Series level. Another reason for the decline may have been the inanity of the teams' names, which, like "Industriales," tend to be based on a regional economic activity: Citricultores (Citric Producers), Salineros (Salt Producers), Cafetaleros (Coffee Growers), and so forth.[6]

Yet the fact is that, even in this period of decline and desperate economic need, baseball excites the fans as pennant races reach their climax, and players enjoy the thrill of competition and the elation and release provided by physical activity and collective bonding. Since a non-Cuban perspective is probably freshest and more valid, I record here the comments of Timothy Dwyer, of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, who wrote a piece after a visit to Cuba to cover the finals of the National Series.[7] He reports on a night game between Industriales and Pinar del Río, the home team for this game:

> By the time the national anthem is played, about 27,000 people have jammed into a park built to hold 22,000. Fans stand behind the outfield fence and inside the old

scoreboard. They perch three stories high on the concrete light stanchions and they sit atop the billboard portrait of Captain San Luis (a local political martyr after whom the stadium was named). . . .

The most prominent sign at the park is a mural on the left-field wall depicting athletes in action, with this message: "And in addition to that, Soldiers of the Homeland," referring to the ballplayers. No one pays any attention to it:

The first pitch is a strike and sets the crowd off. One man has rigged a bicycle pump to a trombone and he pumps away, honking approval. . . . About 1,200 fans have made the trip from Havana. Now they are up, dancing, blowing whistles and ringing bells. . . . Usually there are only one or two police officers at the game. But earlier in the week, an umpire was attacked between games of a doubleheader between Havana and Matanzas in Matanzas, so more police officers attend this series as a precaution. . . .

The transition to postrevolutionary baseball was smoother than it may seem. First of all, INDER has to be seen as the heir of the DGD, which had been attempting to integrate amateur baseball since its creation in the thirties, by organizing the Juveniles and circuits such as the Liga de Pedro Betancourt and the Liga de Quivicán. In fact, if followed closely, the history of postrevolutionary baseball shows that the first championship held to break the hegemony of the Amateur League was organized by the DGD in 1960. The championship involved 240 teams and was truly national in scope. This "I Campeonato de Baseball Amateur de la DGD" (the only one) lasted seven months. Five thousand athletes took part (*Revolución*, December 2, 1960). The tournament was won by the Mulos de Nicaro, an integrated team from that town in Oriente, led by black slugger Daniel Thompson. They beat the Universidad de la Habana Caribs in the finals, which were played in Oriente Province. A subsequent game between the two teams was played at the new stadium in the Ciudad Deportiva on December 3.

Other than Pedro Chávez, the other key transitional figure in the evolution from the Amateur League to postrevolutionary baseball was Alfredo Street, a tall, right-handed pitcher from Boquerón, near Guantánamo, in Oriente Province. A black of Jamaican origin, he began playing in local tournaments near his hometown, where he became a pitcher at age fifteen. Street moved to Havana, where he was given a job at the telephone company as a guard so he could pitch for their team. He played for Teléfonos in the last three championships of the now integrated Amateur League (1959, 1960, and 1961). The telephone company was one of the first taken over by the revolutionary government, which explains the integration of its amateur team. Other blacks in Teléfonos at the time were Antonio (Kinko) Rodríguez and Rafael (Chachirulo) Díaz. Street was a member of the Cu-

ban national team that did not fare well in the third Pan American Games, in Chicago in 1959. On July 15, 1961, he threw a no-hitter against San Francisco, pitching for Teléfonos at Stadium Latinoamericano. He was champion pitcher of the Amateur League in 1960. In 1961 he pitched for the victorious Cuban national team in the 1961 World Series in Costa Rica. He was twenty-four years old in 1960 and had rejected several offers to play professionally because he liked his job at the telephone company. As a result, he was able to join the new National Series organized by INDER, where he had an illustrious career and played on several national teams.

The early history of the National Series was dominated by the Industriales. After the Occidentales, managed by Fermín Guerra, won the first one, in 1962, Industriales won from 1963 to 1967, under Ramón Carneado. They were led by Urbano González, Pedro Chávez, Jorge Trigoura, and Antonio Jiménez, respectively. Their pitching was anchored by Street, Manuel Hurtado, Rolando Pastor, and Maximiliano Reyes. Their second baseman, Urbano González, won a batting championship in 1965 with a .359 average, led in hits three times in the sixties, and became one of the stars. He had a rival in Henequeneros' (Matanzas) second baseman Félix Isasi, a great hitter and base stealer. Other stars of the period were Miguel Cuevas, who played for Granjeros (Camagüey) and was one of the leading sluggers of the sixties. He also hit for average and had a record of 86 RBI's in 1968. Among the pitchers were Modesto Verdura (Azucareros), Rolando Pastor (Occidentales), Manuel Alarcón (Orientales), Aquino Abreu (Occidentales), and Gaspar Pérez (Occidentales). The premier defensive shortstop of the period was Rodolfo (Jabaíto) Puente. All of these men, with outfielder Fidel Linares, pitchers Lázaro Pérez, Rigoberto Betancourt, and Raúl (Guagüita) López, along with Felipe Sarduy, a slugger from Camagüey, shortstop Antonio (Tony) González, and a few others, are at the foundation of the lore of postrevolutionary baseball. They shined at the origin and in a period of ascendancy that included great victories in international competition. Interviewed for *Estrellas del béisbol*, they wax nostalgic about a period when there was "pride in the uniform," meaning team loyalty, and the game was played hard. They, too, suffer from the old-timers' perception of the present as a time of decline, marred by the players' selfishness. In their case, however, it may be based in fact, given that realignment broke up the traditional loyalty based on the old provinces.

These founders gave way in the seventies to what may have been a Golden Age of Cuban postrevolutionary baseball insofar as the production of stars. From the late sixties on, the game came to be dominated by a large black slugger, Agustín Marquetti, an outfielder and first baseman with enormous power. A left-handed hitter who played for Havana, Marquetti was rivaled by Antonio Muñoz, another left-handed slugger, known as "El Gigante del Escambray," and Armando Capiró, a right-handed basher who, like Marquetti, played for Havana, and hit a record 22 home runs in 1973. Another great hitter of the period was Elpidio Mancebo. The pitching was

led by one of the brightest stars of postrevolutionary baseball: Braudilio Vinent (El Meteoro de La Maya—The Meteor from la Maya), a right-hander from Oriente Province. Between 1967 and 1983 he won 178 games. He performed brilliantly in international play, particularly against American teams, though he lost to them in the memorable debacle of 1981 in Edmonton, Canada. The other luminary, also a righty, was José A. Huelga, whose life was cut short by an automobile accident on July 4, 1974, at age twenty-six. By then he had accumulated 73 victories in Cuba, not to mention quite a few stellar performances in international play. Like Vinent, Huelga's feats were against teams from the United States. Close behind these two was lefty Santiago (Changa) Mederos, also an ace in international competition and a consistent winner in Cuba. The great catchers of the period were Lázaro Pérez and Ramón Hechevarría. Industriales' dominance had been broken in the late sixties and early seventies, though they won again in 1973, under Pedro Chávez. But the new powerhouse was Azucareros, which won in 1971 under young Servio T. Borges, who would go on to manage the Cuban national team.

The next superstar within the Cuban firmament of baseball was Victor Mesa, a center fielder born in Sitiecito, district of Sagua la Grande in Las Villas Province. He played for Las Villas and for selections from the central region, and became a fixture on the Cuban national team. A right-hander, Mesa hit for average and power and was a flashy fielder with speed and a sense for the dramatic. But Mesa's signature was his reckless baserunning, a real no-no throughout Cuban baseball history, which earned him the nickname "El Loco." Mesa, a handsome mulatto with a winning smile, was rambunctious, reacted to the fans' jeers and cheers, waved his arms in triumph, and became the quintessential postalita. But he produced, scorning the grim, mechanical maneuvers and training methods introduced by the Sovietization of the Cuban sports machinery. He was both admired and reviled, and because of his notoriety he was the most epic of baseball heroes in Cuba before the advent of Omar Linares. Mesa also gained notoriety for yet another eccentricity that linked him to the Cuban past: He is a fervent follower of Babalú Ayé (St. Lazarus) and makes a spectacular show of devotion during the yearly procession to the *orisha*'s shrine in El Rincón. During these pilgrimages many of the faithful fulfill promises to the saint by punishing themselves in various ways, such as making the long trek on their knees, or with stones attached to their feet. Though not exactly favored by the Communist regime, in recent years this parade of popular piety has been tolerated, and one of the most visible participants has been Mesa, whose political fealty, however, has never been questioned.

When, in 1984 (*Bohemia*, October 12, 1984), Pedro Chávez was asked to name an all-star team of postrevolutionary baseball, he chose the following men: "Ricardo Lazo, catcher, Antonio Muñoz at first, Alfonso Urquiola at second, Pedro José (Cheíto) Rodríguez at third, Rodolfo Pu-

ente at short, and Miguel Cuevas, Víctor Mesa, and Luis Giraldo Casanova in the outfield. The right-handed pitcher would be Manuel Alarcón and the left-handed one Santiago Mederos" (p. 47). As the eighties unfolded, some of these selections would be challenged, particularly at third, shortstop, and perhaps even first base and one of the outfield positions, not to mention the pitchers. Even without moving farther in time than 1984, one misses Marquetti, Capiró, and Vinent from this squad. In any case, there is little doubt that there were stars aplenty in this period, and that defections had not begun to thin out the ranks at the top.

Although expansion and the dilution of talent that began to take place in the eighties reduced fan interest, baseball development in areas other than the capital and the Matanzas region began to have an impact on National Series and Selective Series. Although the first to show this improvement was the central region, the most notable was Pinar del Río, which was considered the most backward area in the development of sports (although it had produced earlier professionals of the stature of Pedro Ramos, Ultus Alvarez, and Rogelio "Borrego" Alvarez). The Pinar del Río team and the selective Occidentales became a natural rival of the teams based around Havana, such as Industriales and Metropolitanos. But this was also due to the emergence of the most remarkable player in the history of postrevolutionary baseball: Omar Linares.

The emergence of Linares, which coincides with a period of both triumphs and defeats at the international level, as well as a dramatic rise in the number of "defections" to Organized Baseball, also saw a trend in Cuban baseball that reflected the major-league game: the "home-run mentality" and the decline of pitching, which could be connected. But Linares, all by himself, could make pitching decline. He is the son of Fidel Linares, who was an accomplished outfielder for Pinar del Río in the sixties and who had several notable performances in international play. Linares was born on October 23, 1967, in the town of San Juan y Martínez, in Pinar del Río. In Barquisimeto, Venezuela, at a Juveniles contest, Linares hit for an average of .307 at age fourteen. Two years later, at Kindersley, Canada, at another meet, he crushed 8 homers, 4 doubles, and 3 triples and finished with an average of .511. He was already on the Cuban national team that lost in Edmonton in 1985. He was chosen for the all-star team of the tournament after hitting .421. By then he was already known as "El Niño" (The Kid) and was dominating the National Series.

Linares filled out at a potent six feet and two hundred pounds but still was able to run the hundred meters in 10.6, a speed he uses to steal almost at will. He is a tremendously agile third baseman with a gun for a throwing arm: His pegs to first have been clocked at ninety miles an hour. His massive homers are legendary in Cuba and abroad. By 1995, with almost 5,000 times at bat, he had an average of .371 in Cuban National and Selective Series, including 333 homers. In international competition his batting average has fluctuated between the .400s and the .500s, with as

many as 11 homers in one International Cup (1987). In the five or six games I have seen him play in Cuba he seemed to be so far above the average that he appeared bored. The last time I saw him in action at the Latinoamericano he was batting .521. Fuentes, his manager with both Pinar del Río and the national team, told me that Linares was running everything out and playing hard. Perhaps, but he looked to me as if he were still going through the motions unchallenged. My impression may be based on Linares' demure demeanor. He is spectacular, but unlike Víctor Mesa or José Canseco, he is not flashy. When I met Linares at the motel where Pinar del Río was staying for the series against Industriales in Havana, he looked more like a heavyweight boxer than a ballplayer. He is extremely gifted, and it is a shame that he has not played to his potential by competing against the best in the world. At thirty-one he is clearly beyond his peak, but it would still be interesting to see him face the likes of Roger Clemens, Randy Johnson, and David Cone on a regular basis. There is no reason to doubt that Linares would excel, but it would have to be proven on the field.

Playing alongside of Linares on the Cuban national team was shortstop Germán Mesa, a gifted fielder in the mold of Puente, his backup, Rey Ordóñez, and previous Cuban greats Willie Miranda and Avelino Cañizares. A smallish man—5 feet, 7 inches and 154 pounds—Mesa hit in the .280s for Industriales in the National and Selective Series. On the national team he paired with second baseman Juan Padilla and later Antonio Pacheco to form superb doubleplay combinations. Both Padilla and Pacheco are strong hitters for middle infielders. At first base the national team had Roberto Colina until he defected, while also using veteran Orestes Kindelán and newcomer (now also gone) Jorge Luis Toca. The leading pitchers of the eighties and nineties are now mostly in Organized Baseball: René Arocha, Osvaldo Fernández, Ariel Prieto, Euclides Rojas, Liván Hernández, Orlando (El Duque) Hernández, and Luis Orlando Arrojo. Omar Ajete, a hard-throwing left-hander for Occidentales and the national team, has had great success and recognition, as has lanky right-hander Pedro Luis Lazo. Francisco Santiesteban has been one of the leading catchers (he, too, recently defected). Rey Isaac, an outfielder from Santiago de Cuba, seems to be one of the budding stars, and Eduardo Paret, in the mold of Mesa but a better hitter, would have taken over as the leading shortstop, but he was recently suspended for attempting to defect. Osmani Santana, another promising young player, an outfielder, has just defected.

Penury during the "Special Period" (the era following the collapse of the Soviet Union), which has forced the reduction of the National Series schedule and the number of night games, together with the many defections, have diminished the quality of Cuban baseball and caused fan interest to decline. The memory of great international triumphs is now tempered by recent defeats, which probably makes less tolerable the squalor of the facilities made available to the players. Yet it is in the international arena

that Cuban baseball must continue to prove itself, perhaps now more than ever, in spite of the presence of more agents ready to offer fabulous deals to its players.

Cuba's dominance of amateur baseball during the past three decades has been such that the most memorable games have been the ones its national team has either lost or come near to losing. Winning has become routine, and routs of their opponents common. Because of the natural political rivalry, the Cuban national team's contests against Team USA have usually been given top billing, and the two squads have been playing exhibition games regularly for the past ten years. But only in the past few have the contests been interesting, and then only because of the spate of defections from the Cuban team, and a gradual decline of the game on the island partly provoked by the crash of the economy after the demise of the Soviet bloc. For the most part, competition between the two countries has been—ironically—a contest of seasoned professionals (Cuba) and collegiate all-stars (USA). Except for the occasional and truly anomalous game, the Cuban national team's only competition has been against an occasional club from a professional league in Venezuela, Mexico, Japan, or Puerto Rico. Even then the Cubans have fared quite well. Until recently, the team's stiffest challenge, as in the past, has been at home, against other Cuban selections. I think it is safe to say that if Cuba had been allowed to field three squads in most international contests, they would have taken the top three positions in the standings.

Cuba's record in international competition has been more than adequately covered by the propagandistic *Viva y en juego* up to 1986, and virtually to the present by Peter C. Bjarkman's *Baseball with a Latin Beat* and other publications, so I will not cover it exhaustively here. It is made up of countless victories in a variety of fairly obscure tournaments, or in more visible arenas such as the past two Olympics, but always against competition far below the best in the world. I will concentrate on some of the high and low points, or on tournaments or games of special significance.

Cuba's first international triumph in international play was the already chronicled trouncing of the opposition in Costa Rica in April 1961. International pressure against the new regime led to the Colombian government's denial of visas to the Cuban team for the next World Series, following the old practice of "If you can't beat them, don't let them play." The Federación Internacional de Béisbol Aficionado (FIBA) wanted to prevent Cuba from competing, and therefore did not recognize the Juveniles world championship Cuba had just won over Canada in Havana. Trouble ensued at the tenth Central American and Caribbean Games, held in August 1966 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. There were delays in allowing the ship *Cerro Pelado,* carrying the Cuban delegation, to enter the port of San Juan. Once inside, only one-third of the Cuban athletes marched during the opening

ceremonies because the rest had not yet disembarked. The team was cheered by some and booed by Cubans against the revolution, who also threw stones at them. Cuba won the first baseball game, 5–2, against Puerto Rico behind righty Aquino Abreu. Venezuela then beat Cuba, 1–0, behind Adán Morales. Cuba's Gaspar (Curro) Pérez pitched a great game but lost on errors, one his own. Pedro Chávez hit a long drive that was caught four hundred feet away in center by Alfredo Díaz. Cuba then bested the Dominican Republic, 1–0. Jesús Torriente gave up only three hits, and Miguel Cuevas got a double. Rigoberto Betancourt allowed Panama only one hit and Cuba scored seven runs as they bombed three pitchers. Cuba, Venezuela, Panama, and Puerto Rico tied for first place. Alfredo Street blanked Dutch Antilles, 6–0, striking out thirteen. Pedro Chávez hit a homer. Aquino Abreu blew up against Mexico, but a good relief effort by Raúl (Guagüita) López won the game, as Pedro Chávez hit a sacrifice fly in the ninth inning to drive in the winning run, scored by Antonio Jiménez. Cuba and Puerto Rico finished in a tie with 5 and 1 records, and Cuba won the playoff game. The following Cuban players made the games' all-star team: Ricardo Lazo, catcher; Urbano González, second base; Antonio (Tony) González, shortstop; Miguel Cuevas, left field; Felipe Sarduy, center field; Pedro Chávez, right field; and Rigoberto Betancourt, left-handed pitcher. The victory in Puerto Rico was a harbinger of things to come.

The sixteenth Amateur World Series, held in the Dominican Republic in 1969, was played under a great deal of political tension. This was perhaps a watershed tournament for Cuban postrevolutionary baseball. The United States fielded a team for the first time since the bogus 1942 squad that came to Havana and, like Cuba, won every game to reach the final confrontation for the title. In addition to Cuba and the United States there were teams from Venezuela, Panama, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Mexico, the Dutch Antilles, Guatemala, and Colombia. The Dominican Republic finished third, with a 7 and 2 record. The team played its heart out before the home crowds. The Series was played with a lot of anti-American feeling because of the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic. Games were held in Santo Domingo, San Pedro de Macoris, and Santiago de los Caballeros. In the final, against the Americans, pitcher Gaspar (Curro) Pérez was brilliant in relief, drove in the tying run, and later scored the winning one for Cuba. Twenty thousand were at the closing game, along with seven thousand policemen! The team was managed by Servio Tulio Borges, with the technical assistance of Juan Ealo and Pedro (Natilla) Jiménez. Cubans again dominated the all-star team selected at the end of the tournament: Felipe Sarduy, first base; Felix Isasi, second base; Owen Blandino, third base; Agustín Marquetti, outfield; Fermín Laffita, outfield; and Gaspar Pérez, pitcher. The Cuban team also boasted stellar pitchers Santiago (Changa) Mederos, José A. Huelga, and Lázaro Santana, with Lázaro Pérez and Ramón Hechevarría as catchers.

Servio Tulio Borges, a very young manager and the first to emerge after the traditional figures had retired, led the Cuban national team to three pennants in Pan American Games and seven in Amateur World Series. In 1977 he managed the team in a series of nine games against professional Mexican and Venezuelan teams. Borges presided over the transition to the aluminum bat and the designated hitter. He was obviously also part of the move toward the Sovietization of sports.

The seventies are the high-water mark of Cuban postrevolutionary baseball. Cuba not only dominated but also often held the contests at home, showcasing its powerful national team and its new facilities. The team's superiority also demonstrated to the people the country's success in one area, in spite of the grave social, political, and economic problems. This was the same plan, but on a larger scale, that Batista had carried out with the famed Amateur World Series of the forties, and Machado with the 1930 Pan American Games.

In 1970 Cuba won the eighteenth Amateur World Series, held in Colombia, in spectacular fashion. This was, for a change, a fiercely contested tournament that saw the American and Cuban teams finish with identical 10 and 1 records. The American team was led by future major leaguer Burt Hooton, who baffled the Cubans with his knuckle-curve in their only defeat. But in the playoffs José A. Huelga bested Hooton in eleven innings, 3–1, in one of the classic games of international amateur competition. The second game was postponed several days, but when it was played, lefty Changa Mederos took the mound against Richard Troedson. Cuba prevailed in a tight game in which Manuel Alarcón and Huelga pitched masterfully in relief. Troedson won 8 and lost 10 over two years in the Majors. But Hooton went on to have quite a good career with the Dodgers, and the ill-fated Huelga became a hero back home. The twenty-first Campeonato Mundial de Baseball was played in Cuba. The games were staged all over the island, with Cuba emerging victorious, though the national team showed some weaknesses on offense (*Bohemia*, December 3, 1971). They won essentially because of their pitching, particularly that of Mederos, who was peaking. Capiró, however, did not hit as well as expected and neither did Isasi or Rosique. Elpidio Mancebo was the batting star.

The nineteenth Amateur World Series was also played in Cuba. This tournament was held during the propitious month of February, in 1972. There was an elaborate pageant during the inaugural ceremonies to celebrate Cuba's baseball traditions and the revolutionary regime. Cuba won, undefeated with a 9 and 0 record, followed by Colombia at 7 and 2. The United States did not send a team, owing to the increasing political tensions. Fifty-five thousand fans filled the Latinoamericano for the opener, but the tournament was again played in the new stadiums throughout Cuba. This has to be one of the high points of postrevolutionary baseball and a propaganda windfall both abroad and at home for the regime. After

winning, Cuba played against an all-star team made up of the best players from the other countries and beat them, too. The article in *Cuba Internacional* (February 1972, p. 62) that I am following here crows about the triumphs up to 1972 of postrevolutionary baseball: "Besides winning the Amateur World Series in Costa Rica (1961), República Dominicana (1969), Colombia (1970), and Cuba (1971), there were victories in the Pan American Games in São Paulo (1963) and Cali (1971), as well as in the Central American and Caribbean Games of San Juan, Puerto Rico (1966) and Panama City (1970)."

In February 1979 the fourth International Cup was played in Cuba. Cuba had not played in the previous three, which had taken place in Italy (1973), Canada (1975), and Nicaragua (1977). The United States sent a team to this competition. It was the first time an American amateur team had visited Cuba in thirty-seven years. The tournament was a great triumph for Pedro José (Cheíto) Rodríguez, a Cuban slugger who hit from the left side. He led in homers with 7, hits with 18, runs with 15, and RBIs with 18. He finished with batting average of .450 and a slugging percentage of 1.000 because he had more bases than turns at bat! Cheíto was then twenty-four years old and had the third-highest home-run frequency in history, behind Sendaharu Oh and Babe Ruth. Cheito's was higher, according to a *Cuba Internacional* piece (February 1979) than Killebrew's, Williams's, Mantle's, and Aaron's. Cheito was a stocky 5 feet, 7 inches and 195 pounds, and his fame reached the United States, where I heard rumors about scouts eager to sign him for the Yankees. In International competition he had, by then, an average of .360, with 55 homers in 444 times at bat, and an average of a homer per 8.1 times at bat. The cup was also a triumph for manager Servio Tulio Borges: "Ten years of uninterrupted victories . . . His debut as manager of the Cuban national team took place in 1969, when he was only twenty-two years old and won his first world championship in the Dominican Republic . . . six world titles, three Pan American, and three Central American and Caribbean, together with an International Cup. . . ." Fidel Castro was in attendance at some of the games and, of course, in the victory celebration.

In November 1980 the twenty-first Amateur World Series went to Japan. Cuba again won, undefeated (11 and 0) under Borges. Lourdes Gourriel got the decisive hit against the United States, but winning was a foregone conclusion. Cuba just rolled over everybody, mercy-ruling some of the teams. Gourriel was at this time one of the most popular players in Cuba. The Japanese setting gave the Amateur World Series a truly global quality, even if coverage in the United States and elsewhere was meager. It also served to underscore the differences between Asian and American (in the continental sense) baseball. The smaller, weaker Asians played an inside game, going for a single run even when far behind because they lacked the slugging power to go for a rally. They felt that their only hope was to inch back into contention. It was a very disciplined game, with pitchers seldom

issuing walks and working tirelessly in games and in the bullpen. But they were no match for the Cuban bashers, who overwhelmed them on offense. The differences in style helped, even if only by contrast, hone the Cubans' play, which continued to be, although more conservative in general, a reflection of the Americans'.

In 1981 Cuba suffered a defeat that remains in postrevolutionary baseball lore as the archetypal warning against complacency. The fifth International Cup was played in Edmonton, Canada, after a Selective Series in Cuba that was considered among the best, and a leap forward in quality of play. Ahtough the Cuban national team crushed the Americans in their first meeting, the Cubans lost consecutive games to Canada and the Dominican Republic. They made the playoff, however, aided by Vinent, who defeated the South Koreans in a crucial game. The Americans chose lefty Ed Vosberg for the deciding game, and Borges went with Rogelio García. The game went back and forth, with Vinent being brought in to relieve with only a day's rest. He was superb, and Pedro Medina hit a homer to tie the contest at five. But the Americans prevailed, 6–5, in ten innings (the team had future major leaguers Franklyn Stubbs, Oddibe McDowell, and Bruce Wolcott). In the purple prose of postrevolutionary reporting, this defeat "is a thorn stuck in the deepest feelings of Cuban baseball players, and especially in Braduilio Vinent's."[8]

In October 1984 the World Championship was played in Havana, and there was further evidence of the improvement of baseball in areas heretofore discounted on the map of international play. Fidel Castro attended the first game in the company of West Germany's Willy Brandt, who was visiting Cuba. There was, again, a lavish pageant, with a tribute to the nineteenth-century players who fought in the War of Independence. Baseball was being incorporated into the revolution's chiliastic version of Cuban history, which progressed in providential fashion from 1868, to 1895, to 1933, and finally to the "definitive liberation" in 1959. Conrado Marrero threw out the ceremonial first pitch to retired star Rodolfo (Jabaito) Puente, probably because the Maximum Leader was too busy with the baseball-innocent Brandt. Fidel Castro must have had a scare, for these games provided a few surprising developments. In their first match, the Cuban national team reached the ninth inning trailing the Italian team! They were saved from utter embarrassment at the last moment by the hitting of Lourdes Gourriel and Alfonso Urquiola. Then they lost to Puerto Rico, 5–4. Manager Chávez came under attack for the way he used his pitchers. The batters were criticized for swinging at too many first pitches, and the whole club was accused of falling prey to the home-run mentality, a taboo in Cuban baseball strategy going back to Almendares Park and La Tropical. There was concern about the quality of the pitching. The Cubans finally won, with Antonio Muñoz hitting dramatic homers. The American team averaged nineteen years of age and had future major-league star Barry Bonds, described as a contact hitter who used the whole field. Panama's

team, which did well, was managed by former Baltimore Oriole Ruthford (Chico) Salmón.

Played in venues throughout the country, the meet was a display of the density of Cuba's baseball history before and after the revolution. In addition to the opening pageant in Havana, there were similar ceremonies in other cities. In Santiago de Cuba, for instance, the luminaries in attendance were Manuel Alarcón, Elpidio Mancebo, and Andrés Telemaco, recent retirees, and old Aristónico Correoso, a Cuban League pitcher. The break between eras was being bridged with these ceremonies, in an effort to present postrevolutionary baseball as the culmination of Cuban baseball history. No mention was made, to be sure, of former Cuban stars in exile, or of current Cuban players excelling in the majors. A triumphant feeling was being promoted. Amateur baseball, the purest kind, was reaching a peak with this tournament, hosted by the country leading it, and with its Maximum Leader everywhere to celebrate.

In the late eighties the United States put together national teams that were worthy opponents of the Cubans. These Teams USA eventually lost the 1987 Pan American Games in Indianapolis and the 1987 and 1988 International Cup in Cuba and Italy, respectively, coming in second to the Cubans every time. But they acquitted themselves well and actually beat the Cuban team several times. The final confrontation, at the 1988 Olympics in South Korea, was aborted when Cuba boycotted the Games. (As in the 1984 Los Angeles games, when the Cubans also boycotted, baseball would be an exhibition sport, yet everyone concerned took the Seoul tournament quite seriously.) But there were memorable showdowns in a series played in Havana from July 16 to 21 as well as in the 1987 Pan American Games. In the summer of 1987, Team USA, coached by Ron Fraser (University of Miami), had players of the caliber of Frank Thomas, Ed Sprague, Scott Servais, Tino Martínez, Jim Poole, and Gregg Olson, all of whom would become major leaguers, with Thomas and Martínez becoming stars. But the hero of the team was Jim Abbott, who beat the Cubans at home in Havana in the mid-July tournament. Abbott, who went on to have an excellent major-league career in spite of having been born without a right hand, became a celebrity in Cuba. He was given standing ovations at Stadium Latinoamericano, the first when he deftly handled a chopper in front of the plate by the first hitter he faced. He mowed down the Cubans with his powerful fastball and control. The Maximum Leader greeted Abbott after one performance, hailing him as an example to all, of course. In Indianapolis, Cuba won the gold medal, but Team USA beat them once with a dramatic homer by Ty Griffin, and other games were close. In October the United States sent a different team (except for catcher Servais) to Cuba for the International Cup. This was a much tougher tournament because it included the Asian teams South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. The Cubans won thirteen straight and finished undefeated, outscoring their opposition in the preliminary phase, 101–9, and 37–10 in the medal round. Only

Taiwan gave them trouble, in a ten-inning game in which the Cubans prevailed, 3–2. Omar Linares, then twenty years old, hit an incredible eleven homers, shortstop Alejo O'Reilly blasted nine, and catcher Orestes Kindelán eight. The most impressive American player of this International Cup was Robin Ventura, who became a favorite with the Cubans.

In 1988, in preparation for the Olympics, the summer of 1987 Team USA was reconstituted and strengthened. It again competed strongly against the Cubans. Ventura was retained from the International Cup team and Abbott and Poole were back, but the staff was improved with the addition of Charles Nagy, Andy Benes, and Ben McDonald. It was already known that Cuba would not play in the Olympics, so all other tournaments acquired special interest. In Millington, Tennessee, during their traditional meet, Team USA won the first game but dropped the next four. Then came the World Amateur Championship in Italy. The twelve-team tournament was played in late August and early September. Cuba, which finished undefeated, beat the Americans twice by rallying in the ninth inning both times. In the championship game Abbott held the Cubans to three hits for eight innings and was winning, 3–1. But after a disputed tag play at first, Lourdes Gurriel hit a homer to tie the game. Another controversial tag play ensued, and Lázaro Vargas blooped one off Benes over a drawn-in infield for the Cuban victory. René Arocha had started for the Cubans and dueled Abbott, but the win went to reliever Euclides Rojas, who was involved in several heroic finishes during the tournament. But the star of the 1988 World Amateur Championship was Cuban second baseman Antonio Pacheco, who not only led in hitting but also was voted the top defensive player. Tino Martínez and Robin Ventura, along with Abbott, were the American stars. The Cuban Olympic boycott was disappointing not only to the Americans, who would not have another chance to beat Cuba, but particularly to the Cuban athletes, for whom international travel is one of the most coveted emoluments. There was trouble ahead.

The *New York Times* of August 1, 1991 (p. B12) reported that Lázaro Valle, the star pitcher of the Cuban national team, had a blood clot in his pitching arm and would miss the eleventh Pan American Games about to be held in Havana. "Edel Casas, a sportscaster for Radio Rebelde and the voice of Cuban baseball for the last thirty years, said the loss . . . could open the door for a United States victory." Worse still, René Arocha, another front-line pitcher, had just defected in a stopover at Miami on the way back from the yearly games against Team USA at Millington, Tennessee. The Cuban authorities insisted that he was only their third or fourth starter, but Arocha had a distinguished record in national and international competition. Omar Ajete, a powerful left-hander, became the number one starter, and Osvaldo Fernández moved up to number two. Cuba still swept in the Pan American Games, thrashing Puerto Rico, 18–3, in the last game; they had whipped them, 16–2, in the qualifying round. Ermidelio Urrutia went 6 for 6 in the last game, including 3 home runs. Linares connected twice,

while Orestes Kindelán and Germán Mesa had one apiece. Cuba scored 136 runs in 10 games, and hit over .400 collectively. Jorge Luis Pérez, a lefty, won the final game to round out a team record of 33 and 1 in international play. Fidel Castro bestowed the medals and condescendingly told the American team to "keep on practicing because they have a good squad" (The *Miami Herald*, August 19, 1991).

In preparation for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, the first in which baseball was an official competition sport, Team USA went to Cuba for a series of tune-up games. They were trounced in Holguín by the Cubans, who won all three games, two by scores of 16–1 and 17–6. Howard W. French, reporting the game for the *New York Times* (July 6, 1992), quoted a Cuban sportswriter who said about their national team: "It is almost unfair the burden they are carrying. They are the best in the world and are not expected to lose to anyone, but they know that a loss against the United States would be more than a sports defeat. It would be a national betrayal." The Cuban team, in fact, was peaking, and the new Team USA was no match for them. An excellent "Olympic Preview" by *Baseball America* (August 10–24, 1992) offered much significant information about recent competition between the Cubans and the Americans, as well as a forecast of the match in Barcelona. Interestingly, a chart of the games between the two teams between 1987 and 1992 shows that while Cuba was superior, the Americans had acquitted themselves honorably. Cuba was the winner in twenty-nine games, but Team USA had managed thirteen victories. But the disparity between the two teams as they approached the Olympics was stark. As Jim Callis, the author of the *Baseball America* article, put it: "The average age on Cuba's twenty-five-man pre-Olympic traveling roster was twenty-eight, and sixteen players had been with the national team for at least five years. Team USA's twenty players average a mere twenty years of age and include just seven veterans of the Pan American Games last summer. Each year, Team USA must start from scratch" (p. 4). The core of Cuba's team continued to be Gurriel, Víctor and Germán Mesa, Linares, Kindelán, Orlando (Duque) Hernández, Pacheco, Osvaldo Fernández, Vargas, Rojas, Arrojo, and their manager Jorge Fuentes. They won, undefeated, in Barcelona, while Team USA did not even win a medal, finishing behind Japan and Chinese Taipei. In a game against the Americans, Cuba won, 9–6, after they were down, 5–0, in the first inning. Veteran American coach Ron Fraser declared: "The thing that hurts Cuba is the absence of competition. Most of the time they are kinda bored. If they played major-league clubs they could win" (the *Guardian*, July 31, 1992). In Madrid I watched on TV the semifinal game between Team USA and Cuba on August 4, 1992. Osvaldo Fernández won, 6–1, while Kindelán and Víctor Mesa hit homers and Linares went 3 for 3, with a walk. After the final out of the deciding game an ebullient Víctor Mesa wrapped himself in the Cuban flag and ran around the field, leading the team in a victory lap. Cracks

were beginning to appear, however, particularly in the pitching. But the team was about to have a real test of its talent.

This was a most interesting game the Cuban national team played against the San Juan Senators, a well-known professional club from the Puerto Rican League. It so happened that the 1993 Central American and Caribbean Games were played that year in Puerto Rico at the end of November, during the winter season of professional baseball. The Cuban national team had won handily again, and a game against the Senators was arranged. According to a story in the *San Juan Star* of December 2, 1993 (p. 56), the contest was held the previous evening at Hiram Bithorn Stadium, in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico, with twenty-two thousand fans in the stands. Because of the presence in Puerto Rico of many Cubans opposed to the revolution, there was a great deal of tension. Scuffles erupted between Cuban exiles and members of the Cuban delegation sitting behind the Cuban dugout. The exiles also had a banner flown over the park with a phone number for potential defectors to call. There had been forty defections during the Central American and Caribbean Games, but none from the baseball team. The game itself proved to be a real contest.

The Senators had a typical winter-league squad made up of native major leaguers and American and Puerto Rican prospects of approximately Triple-A caliber, with a few journeymen filling out the roster. Their stars were Atlanta Braves catcher Javier López and Cleveland Indians second baseman Carlos Baerga, along with Toronto Blue Jays slugger Carlos Delgado. In the outfield they had Lee Tinsley, who had played for Seattle and Boston, and Ryan Thompson, who has had a modest career with the Mets. The pitchers were Carlos Reyes, who pitched for Oakland; Shawn Holman, who had a cup of coffee with the Detroit Tigers; lefthander Mike Hampton, who so far has had a modest career with Seattle and Houston, Mets righthander Mel Telgheder, who has done little in the majors, and veteran Rafi (Rafael) Montalvo, who had a brief appearance with Houston in 1986. Led by Fuentes, the Cuban team did quite well, losing only in the ninth inning, when Javier López hit one out off Omar Ajete with a man on base and Cuba ahead, 3–2. Linares hit a homer, Pacheco and Gurriel went 2 for 4, and Lázaro Valle pitched a good game. This Cuban team was loaded with veterans. In addition to those mentioned, there were Víctor and Germán Mesa, Orestes Kindelán now at first, Ermidelio Urrutia in right, and Alberto Hernández as catcher. In the spring of 1995 Orioles star second baseman Roberto Alomar, a Puerto Rican who did not play for the Senators, told me in Fort Lauderdale somewhat defensively that the Cubans had the advantage of aluminum bats. But according to an article in the *San Juan Star,* "Eight of the nine Senators starters forsook their wooden bats for aluminum Wednesday night, negating Cuba's advantage," so the field of play was reasonably even. This was an impressive performance for the Cubans, suggesting that they, like the Senators, were of about Triple-A quality,

except for a few players who were clearly major league—not only López and Baerga, but also probably Linares, Valle, and both Mesas. Although Fuentes claims that, overall, Cuba had a record of 16 and 2 against Mexican, Venezuelan, and Japanese professionals, this is the only recorded game against an opponent of near-major-league quality. But a debacle was around the corner.

In August 1995 the Cuban national team traveled to Millington, Tennessee, for what was already a traditional series of games against Team USA. This location was obviously chosen because of its distance from metropolitan centers where there could be trouble with Cuban exiles. The yearly games in Millington had become a showcase of talent that led to some defections (about which later). This time, Team USA, coached by Skip Bertman, had played about thirty practice games already and caught Cuba cold. They swept the four-game series with delirious fans waving brooms in the stands during the last contest. Troy Glaus singled to win the first game in dramatic fashion. Mark Kotsay had an extended hitting streak and finished above .300. Travis Lee went 2 and 5, chasing Lázaro Valle. Pitcher Ryan Drese struck out ten in one game. Other effective pitchers were Mark Roberts, Mark Johnson, and R. A. Dickey. All of them, according to Cuban broadcaster Eddy Martin, threw at more than ninety miles an hour. None of these players, however, has made an impact in the professionals yet. There were criticisms of manager Fuentes and concerns about the quality of baseball in Cuba. *Granma* of August 30, 1995, voiced some of these grumblings.

In spite of the Cuban triumph in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, all was not well with Cuban baseball. For one, in spite of the batting heroics of Kindelán and Linares, who peppered the outfield stands of Atlanta Fulton County Stadium with their homers, the pitchers were hit freely. One of the factors had to be the defections, which had thinned out the staff. Another was the fear of defections, which led to a final roster made up of veterans, such as Kindelán, who would be in no danger of being lured by the scouts. Germán Mesa, who would eventually be suspended for dealing with agents interested in signing him, was not at his usual position at short. Eduardo Paret, presumably less desirable to the scouts, took his place—he was also suspended for the same reason two years later. All in all there was a sense of change and transition, and indeed some drastic measures were taken back in Cuba. Besides the suspension of Mesa and a few others, about sixty players were forced into retirement, reportedly to make room in the rosters of the National Series for younger, more deserving ones. But one wonders if, as in other areas of Cuban life, political fealty was not the strongest prerequisite. It was also a way of opening up roster spots for fresh talent at a time when the economy would not allow the creation of new teams. Be that as it may, the inescapable fact is that the performance of the Cuban national team not only declined, but also its very operation became troubled. Their traditional games against Team USA, which in 1997 would

take them to the Northeast (including Yale Field, where I expected to see them in action), were canceled at the last moment for fear, according to the communiqué, of "the destabilization of our team." This was obviously a reference to the work of agents such as Joe Cubas, who were actively trying to sign the players to professional contracts. All of this led to their World Cup defeat in Barcelona (August 1997) to the Japanese, and another subpar performance later, in a tournament against Japanese semiprofessionals from industrial leagues. Defections have forced the Cuban national team to deal with the problem of turnover in the same way as amateur programs in other countries where the professionals periodically take the best players.

It is no accident that the spate of defections has taken place after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with catastrophic results in a Cuba subsidized by the Communist bloc. The system of rewards to players has necessarily shrunken and has made their future look bleaker than before. Those who travel abroad for international competition cannot fail to see how far their living conditions are even from those of minor leaguers, owing both to the crash of the economy and to the system of vigilance under which they play. The same article previously quoted by Timothy Dwyer, of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, gives the following description of how the players live:

> On the road, there are no luxury hotels. They live in the bowels of the stadiums. The living quarters smell like the pipes are perpetually backed up. The rooms, crammed with bunk beds, look more like prison cells than bedrooms. Water leaks steadily from the shower heads and most of the wooden commode doors are off the hinges or look as if they have been splintered by kicks and punches . . . They never leave the stadium. On a typical day, the players practice in the morning, eat lunch and then sleep in their tidy dungeons until it's time for batting practice. Those who don't sleep wander around the stadium in shorts and T-shirts.

When I visited Fuentes he was staying with his Pinar del Río team, which was playing against Industriales in Havana that night, in a motel for athletes at Mulgova, near the Havana airport far to the southwest of the city. It was like a cheap American motel in run-down conditions, far from the lures of the capital. The athletes who stay there are virtually quarantined. The team is bused back and forth to the Latinoamericano, which, given the near-absence of public transportation, is not reachable in any other way. I shook hands there and exchanged pleasantries with superstar Omar Linares, who could have easily commanded a suite at the best American hotel with a limousine and a driver waiting for him outside. No pink Cadillac for him, like Miñoso's, however. Tom Miller, who traveled with one of the current Cuban teams through the provinces, reported similar arrangements in his *Trading with the Enemy* (1992).

Before the spate of defections of the nineties, which continue to this date, quite a few Cuban players had managed to come to the United States and

had tried to make it in Organized Baseball. Many came over in the 1980 Mariel boatlift. A story in the *New York Times* of May 18, 1980, reports of several who tried to get in shape while at a relocation camp in Florida and who were looked at by some scouts. The players, Julio Soto, a second baseman, Julio Rojo, a pitcher, Carlos Martínez Pérez, a catcher, and Román Duquesne and Eduardo Cajuso, whose positions are not given, appeared too old to have a chance. Rojo had set a record of 18 wins in the 1968 National Series. Soto was a .250 hitter in Cuba. Soto and Duquesne signed eventually with the Macon Peaches of the South Atlantic League, and Cajuso with the Detroit Tiger organization (*Miami Herald*, June 4, 1980). None seems to have made it very far.

The best of those who came in the Mariel boatlift was Bárbaro Garbey.[9] Born in Santiago de Cuba in 1956, a right-handed line-drive hitter 5 feet 7 inches tall and about 180 pounds, Garbey had enjoyed success in Cuba and made the national team. But he had faced disciplinary problems stemming from accusations about fixed games. In the United States he had excellent seasons in the Detroit Tigers minor-league system. He was brought up and hit .287 for the world champions, becoming the first postrevolutionary Cuban player to make the majors. Garbey did not get a hit in twelve at-bats in the World Series, hit .257 the next year, and was traded to Oakland, where he never played. He had been suspended twice while in the minors, once for threatening a heckler with his bat, and continued to have troubles in the majors. Garbey was also a poor fielder who could not find himself at first, third, or the outfield. From 1986 to 1994 he hit .335 in the Mexican League, playing third mostly for the Mexico City Tigers, with seasons of twenty-eight and twenty-nine homers. In 1988 he played in thirty games for the Texas Rangers but failed to hit.

René Arocha's defection in 1991 was the first from the Cuban national team and hence a watershed. His actions stimulated others to do the same, and he was himself involved in helping a few gain their freedom. As the national team made a stopover in Miami on their way home from their traditional games against Team USA in Tennessee, Arocha walked away and was picked up by family members. But when I spoke to Camilo Pascual in Miami shortly after Arocha's defection he told me that he and Orlando Peña had given him a tryout and had not been impressed. They felt that Arocha did not throw hard enough. But Arocha was signed by the Cardinals, had a good-enough minor-league stint with their Louisville Triple-A associate, and made the majors. His record there has not been stellar, however, and he has been injured for the past two years.

The *New York Times* of June 2, 1993 chronicles the defection of five Cuban players in the wake or Arocha's. They were being helped by a Los Angeles–based agent named Gus Dominguez: "The most likely candidate to succeed: Iván Alvarez, 22 years old, a 6-foot, 3-inch, 210-pound left-handed pitcher with a 90-mile-an-hour fastball. . . . The other four hopefuls

are outfielder Alexis Cabreja, 24, 6-1, 205; shortstop Osmani Estrada, 24, 5-10, 175; first baseman Lázaro González, 24, 5-11, 200, and a distinct long shot, 32-year-old knuckleball pitcher Rafael Rodríguez, 5-11, 195." Alvarez, Cabreja, and Estrada defected during a tournament in Mérida, Mexico. The three were teammates for Industriales. Alvarez had been demoted from the national team, which he had made at age twenty. He claimed it was political. Cabreja "found all the outfield spots in the national team taken, despite his .336 batting average over seven seasons—the third highest career average in Cuba, according to Domínguez." Agent Domínguez explained, echoing his clients' complaints: "It's hard to break into the national team. . . . Usually the only guys who break in at an early age are pitchers or someone like Linares because he is such a super, super player. And once a Cuban player is established on the national team, no matter what he does during the season, they are going to keep him, because they have proven they can win with him." Rodríguez made it across the treacherous Straits of Florida on a raft in January. González hit .340 last year in a Canadian league after defecting. Cabreja, who had jumped from a Cuban Juveniles team, only hit .226 with Erie, in Class AA. He then went to Mexico, where he played for Puebla from 1994 to 1995, batting for an average of .325, but with little power. Cabreja played some exhibitions for the Yankees as a "replacement player" in 1995, the year of the strike. But none of the others has made it even that close to the major leagues.

In July 1993, during the University Games being played in Buffalo, two Cuban baseball players abandoned their team. One was Edilberto Oropesa, a twenty-three-year-old pitcher who jumped the chain-link fence at Sal Maglie Stadium in Niagara Falls, got into the waiting car of a relative, and drove to Miami. The other was today's brilliant Met shortstop Rey Ordóñez, who left the next day. He was twenty-two then, and had left his wife and eighteen-month-old son back in Havana. Ordóñez, with a famous bullfighter's name, is such a flashy fielder that he made the Mets after hitting only in the middle .200s in AA and AAA. He did have one great winter season in Puerto Rico, in 1995–96, when he battled Roberto Alomar for the batting title until the end, coming in second but at a sparkling .351 average. Away from Caribbean weather and food Ordóñez has hit about .220 in the majors, but his fielding and quick mind in the field have made him a fixture with the Mets. He won a Gold Glove in 1997. His play has awed everyone, placing him in the distinguished tradition that goes back through Willie Miranda to Silvio García, Pájaro Cabrera, and Anguila Bustamante among the all-time Cuban shortstops.

After Arocha came Euclides Rojas, a right-handed reliever who depended on his breaking pitches. His is a moving story with touching elements of friendship and human solidarity. A *balsero* who played for the Cuban national team for several years, Rojas took to the sea in a makeshift raft in 1995. The rickety vessel was only fifteen feet long and carried fifteen people. While at sea, Rojas witnessed terrible scenes, as when a woman who

began to hallucinate yelled, "I see lights, I am going to eat bread," jumped into the water, and drowned. I talked to Rojas in August 1995, when he was pitching for the Portland Seadogs of the Eastern League. He told me then that René Arocha, whom he has known since he was eleven and René twelve, flew to the Guantánamo Naval Base to get him out after he was picked up from the sea. Arocha talked to Rojas and his wife to reassure them and acted as their sponsor to enter the United States.

Rojas' career is a good illustration of how the sports system works in Cuba. He is a strapping six-footer, with light eyes and chestnut hair. Born in Havana, he told me that he was recruited from school at age eleven and sent to a baseball academy, where he met Arocha. Rojas was recruited by a *comisionado*. There are provincial, regional, and municipal *comisionados* who act as scouts, he explained. He played for Industriales in the National Series and made the Selective Series teams and the national team. He played with them for three or four years, traveling to Spain, Holland, Italy, the United States, Mexico, and other countries. The broadcaster Eddy Martin told me in Havana that Rojas was known as "the hero of Italy" because of his brilliant relief performances in the World Amateur Championship played there by the Cuban national team in 1988. Rojas said that Cuban players are warned that Americans would treat them badly if they went to live in the United States, and were told about crime, drugs, and violence in the streets. I asked him how he thought the Cuban national team would fare in the Eastern League. He replied that they would win because they are very good, experienced ballplayers.

Most of the recent defections have been made possible by agent Joe Cubas, who has become the Joe Cambria of the nineties, except that he does not work for an individual team. He has obtained fabulous deals in the millions for most of the players, nearly all of whom happen to be pitchers. But the results on the field have been mixed.[10]

The next group was of defectors made up of three pitchers: Ariel Prieto, Oswaldo Fernández, and Liván Hernández. Prieto, like Arocha represented by Gus Domínguez, is a strapping right-hander who went almost directly to the majors with the Oakland A's after a brief stint with Palm Springs in the Western League. With Cuba he had won 76 games in international competition, averaging 9.3 strikeouts per 9 innings. He fanned 20 in one game against Nicaragua (*Baseball America*, June 26–July 9, 1995, p. 19). Fuentes told me that he thought Prieto had the best chance of all the defectors to make it in the majors. In his major-league debut he lost a heartbreaker to Cleveland and continued to do well, but later was injured. Prieto's main weapon, as opposed to Arocha's, Rojas' and Fernández's, is a blazing fastball, once clocked at 101 miles per hour. He is back with Oakland after an injury to his arm, having a mediocre season with a bad team. He finished the 1997 season at six and eight, with an ERA over 5.00 in only 125 innings. Oswaldo Fernández, one of the top pitchers on the Cuban national team, who helped them win the 1992 Olympics, also made

the majors. He has been a starter with the San Francisco Giants, but with modest success so far. He is now injured, and word is that it might be career-ending, though he recently told me at Shea Stadium in New York that he is on the mend. Liván Hernández, the most promising of the group because he is the youngest, did well initially in spring training with the Marlins but had to be sent down, where he was hit freely at the Triple-A level. He was then sent to the Portland Seadogs of the Eastern League with Carlos Tosca, a Cuban American who speaks Spanish and managed to straighten him out. Liván, apparently, loved American food and gained too much weight. He got into shape, made the Marlins in 1997, and had a sensational season, winning 9 in a row at one point. Hernández struck out 15 Atlanta Braves in a National League championship game to help the Marlins win the pennant and then won 2 games and the Most Valuable Player Award in the 1997 World Series. His success upstaged, even in Cuba, Fidel Castro's high kitsch beatification of Che Guevara in Cuba, a suggestive interference of baseball in Cuban politics and an indication of how the game and the Maximum Leader have parted ways in his dotage.

Liván's success probably stems from the fact that, being much younger than his compatriots, he has been trained better and has learned to adapt to organized baseball, and to the wooden bat (against aluminum, pitchers tend not to come inside enough and use more breaking stuff than against wood). Another case in which youth has been a determining factor in success in the majors is Ordóñez's.

The most recent defections have been those of Rolando Arrojo, Vladimir Núñez, and Roberto Colina. Arrojo, a right-hander, was probably the best pitcher in Cuba. Tall and slender, he has a ninety-plus fastball with movement. Because he signed with the expansion Tampa Bay Devil Rays he has not pitched in the majors, but he is doing well in the minors and there is great expectation about his debut. Núñez, another right-handed pitcher, also signed with an expansion team, the Arizona Diamondbacks, and has yet to pitch in the majors, but has also been doing well in the minor leagues and is being touted as a sure shot. Colina, a slugging first baseman, is also in the minors. Even more recent defectors, such as catcher Francisco Santiesteban and outfielder Osmani Santana, have yet to sign professional contracts, but I expect that they will play winter ball and be ready for next year's spring training.

The official reaction to the defections in Cuba is in consonance with the totalitarian nature of the regime, and the patrimonial sense in which athletes, and sports in general, are regarded as soldiers of the motherland, owing allegiance to the commander in chief, who stands as the father figure. An article in the official newspaper *Granma,* of October 29, 1996, summarizes the regime's response to the defections, which took the form of criminal charges brought against Juan Ignacio Hernández Nodar, a Cuban American residing in Venezuela, and the suspension of several prominent players for entering into deals with him. The scouts are identified by

Granma as Mafia-linked elements of Cuban origin based abroad, mostly the United States, who "have dedicated themselves, in a vulgar, shameful, and unacceptable manner, to the task of approaching, harassing, pressuring, and making tempting offers to Cuban athletes, with the purpose of stimulating and provoking desertions of treason against the Motherland." Recent defectors, such as Arocha, Fernández, Hernández, Núñez, and Larry Rodríguez, all of whom "betrayed the Cuban people," are accused of remaining in touch with players in Cuba such as Orlando Hernández and Germán Mesa, inciting them to defect: "It is worth mentioning that these mafiosi also organized and carried out the clandestine departure from the country of the families of Osvaldo Fernández and Rolando Arrojo." Hernández Nodar was arrested in Sancti Spiritus, where he was attending the Juveniles World Championship, allegedly acting as agent for Joe Cubas. Nodar is reputed to have violated Cuban laws controlling emigration and the organization of illegal departures from the country. *Granma* claims that ballplayers Germán Mesa and Orlando Hernández had close ties with Hernández Nodar and were making preparations to leave Cuba, hence their suspension. The article's conclusion is a paean to the system, whose central figure is the Maximum Leader, who embodies its purity of purpose: "Aside from these actions that injure the innocent feelings of the people, the overwhelming majority of our revolutionary athletes remain firm, faithful and unbowed; on the side of the Revolution, the Party and their Commander in Chief. They are the purest pride and joy of the entire Cuban people."

The recent suspension of Eduardo Paret and several others, including coaches, not to mention the defections of Santana and Santiesteban, show that the repressive measures have not put an end to the problem. The schism between doctrine and practice is too severe. On the one hand, the government can (as in other realms) negotiate professional contracts for some athletes, including ballplayers in professional leagues outside Organized Baseball, but individuals are not allowed to strike their own deals. The issue, then, is not professionalism, but for whom one performs in exchange for money, and to whom the money is given. It seems to me, as it does to other observers, that baseball in Cuba is in the midst of a severe crisis from which it will not emerge unscathed. Further repressive measures will incite more defections; less supervision will have the same result.

Recent losses in Barcelona and Japan (against semiprofessional teams from industrial leagues) are clear indications that the sport is in disarray in Cuba. A colleague of mine at the University of Havana, Ana Cairo, writes to tell me that heads are rolling because of the defeats. As I feared, one was that of my friend Jorge Fuentes. Reynaldo González was removed as head of INDER and replaced by Humberto Rodríguez, a thirty-eight-year-old judge and member of the Communist Party's Central Committee. A recent report (October 1997) in the news says that INDER has been stripped of its convertible dollar budget as a result of allegations of corruption. It is difficult to foresee what will happen next, but it seems to me that

postrevolutionary baseball as it has been known in Cuba for the past thirty-eight years is about to undergo radical changes.

The baseball season has also been revamped, scrapping the two parts—national and selective—in favor of a single, longer tournament beginning in mid-November and ending in April. Is this a reduction determined by economic need, or is it a way of keeping more ballplayers occupied through the year? Will this further dilute the quality of play? How can the regime keep the lid on players' defections after Liván Hernández's triumph in the World Series, during which his mother had to be allowed to travel to Miami, and his half brother's $6 million contract with the Yankees? El Duque's success and charisma are creating a momentum that will be difficult to contain. The hard-line, retrograde policies outlined at the Communist Party Congress in October 1997 seem like desperate measures by the aging ruling elite to hold on to power.

The harsh response to the spate of defection, however, may have been only the first reaction to the crisis, not the definitive one, or the one that became policy. On September 28, 1998, I met with Humberto Rodríguez González, the new INDER president in Havana, and discussed the situation with him. Rodríguez, a young man in his early forties dressed casually in blue jeans, made his mark as the mayor of Santa Clara, where his liberal policies included the securing of a space for the local transvestite community to gather freely. He admits that baseball in Cuba has experienced a decline in recent years, but that new measures were being taken to restore it to its former preeminence. When I ask him why bother to do so on the face of economic hardship, he answers that he considers baseball to be an integral part of Cuban culture. He underlines "culture," not politics, and says that his plan is to encourage massive participation at all levels. Among the new crop of bureaucrats in the regime, Rodríguez is, with Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, among the most interested in culture. A classical music buff, he is proud that at the opening game of the next baseball season an orchestra will perform. Rodríguez, in fact, levels the same kinds of criticism to post-revolutionary baseball in Cuba that I have been putting forth in this book. He wants to move away from the pyramid system that encouraged the production of players of for the national team to emphasize the participation of all—*participación masiva*. His aim is to have teams in all schools and municipalities (as in the old days, I tell myself). When I ask him about the ban on older players' participating in professional leagues in countries such as Japan, he replies that what he would like is that the top athletes, at their peak, compete with and against the best in the world, including professionals. Rodríguez cites the case of Cuban teams, such as a women's volleyball squad, that have played in professional circuits and brought back large sums of money to the country. He hopes the same can happen in baseball.

I can not say that my solutions would be the same as those Rodríguez proposes, for they all assume a continuance of the current regime and

political system in Cuba, and with Fidel Castro still the boss who knows how much can really change. But his critical view of the obsolescent sports establishment on the island and his fresh apporach to renew it are encouraging. Even granting his basic premises concerning the survival of the regime, one has to wonder if there are enough economic resources to bring about the change. I was told in Matanzas, six days after my interview with Rodríguez, that there were hardly any baseballs for the children in the baseball academy at the Palmar del Junco to practice with. And ordinary men in Havana expressed regret that they lacked the most basic equipment to play even softball after work. The best that one can hope for is that a significant transition can really take place and the fabulous wealth of Organized Baseball spreads to Cuba. Then, of course, the question would be at what cost.

What does the future hold? Could the collapse of the Cuban regime send an avalanche of players to organized baseball? I believe that any opening of relations between the United States and Cuba would bring about such an avalanche, probably preceded by a feeding frenzy of scouts trying to get first dibs on all the available talent, a huge pool in comparison to those of much smaller countries, such as the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Would such an opening bring back professional baseball to Cuba? It is pleasant to imagine a resumption of the Cuban League history, with the "eternal rivals" resuscitated from their forty-year slumber, and new teams dotting the island. Perhaps these could be developed from those that now make up the National Series and a Miami team added to the Cuban League. But, like everything else in Cuba, it all depends on the will or the endurance of the Maximum Leader, and when he will make his last pitch.

The 1998 season in the major leagues was a memorable one for Cuban players, even though pitchers René Arochia, Osvaldo Fernández, and Ariel Prieto were all injured and unable to play. But established stars like Canseco, Palmeiro, and Ordóñez had excellent seasons. Canseco surprised everyone by clouting 46 homers, the highest single-year total of his career, driving in 107 runs, and stealing 29 bases. It is true that his average reached only .237, but his production, including 98 runs scored, was significant and almost helped Toronto reach the playoffs. Palmeiro had one of the best seasons ever by a Cuban player in the major leagues. The Oriole first-baseman finished with an average of .292 with 43 homers, his highest single-year total, and 121 RBIs. Like Canseco, he scored 98 runs, but unlike him he is also a fine fielder. Ordóñez, the Mets' flashy shortstop, won his second Gold Glove award in a row, and his .246 batting average was adequate for a defensive player with his outstanding skills. If to his 42 RBIs one could add all the runs that he kept from scoring with his acrobatic catches and improbable plays his contribution would look even better. Meanwhile, last year's World Series hero, Liván Hernández, had a very

good season, taking into account that the champion Marlins were dismantled by ownership and became a very weak team. He posted a 10–12 record with a 4.72 ERA, a more than respectable performance for a pitcher with so little support.

Two newcomers made their mark in 1998: right-handed pitchers Rolando Arrojo and Orlando (El Duque) Hernández. The rangy Arrojo had a great season pitching for the last place expansion team Tampa Bay Devil Rays. He had a record of 14–12 with an ERA of 3.56 and an impressive strikeout to bases on balls ration (152–66). Arrojo had his best performance during the first half of the season and made the National League all-star team, a first for a Cuban defector. Had he not tired in the second half, he would have become a twenty-game winner.

But Arrojo's performance could not match that of Orlando Hernández, whose heroics eclipsed even those of his half-brother Liván the previous year. In Cuba, El Duque had been one of the best pitchers in the history of post-revolutionary Cuban baseball. In eleven years with the Havana-based Industriales he had amassed a 129–47 record. He had also enjoyed extraordinary performances in international competition and was considered, with Arrojo, among the top three or four pitchers on the island. El Duque was stellar in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, and in the 1993–94 National Series finished with a 1.74 ERA. His successes, classy demeanor, and charisma had earned his moniker, something frowned upon by Cuban authorities, who claim to be against the idolization of individuals. His prominence, combined with the flurry of defections in recent years (particularly Liván's), made those authorities suspicious of him, and they suspended him from national and international competition in 1996. He was also a victim of the restructuring campaign to pare down the rosters of veterans, make room for younger players for whom teams could not be found or created, and reduce costs during what has been euphemistically called the "special period" (that is to say, the collapse of the Cuban economy in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union). According to a Cuban baseball card issued in 1994, El Duque was born on October 11, 1965, so he was thirty-two years old in the summer of 1998. Cuban authorities perhaps figured that keeping him out of action so long past his prime would diminish interest in him by professional teams. Probably impelled by anxiety about his advanced sports age, not to mention the lack of freedom and bleak future in Cuba, El Duque reached the desperate decision to take to the sea in a small, rickety boat with seven others on December 26, 1997.

There ordeal crossing the Florida Straits, the days of hunger endured when they did arrive in Anguilla Cay, in Bahamian waters, their rescue, and El Duque's subsequent signing with the Yankees are the stuff of movies. In fact, he received several offers from Hollywood by the time the season ended. As he had done with others, agent Joe Cubas had El Duque obtain a Costa Rican visa to avoid the draft and deal with professional teams as a

free agent. In my mind El Duque's most remarkable feat was to gather himself together in Costa Rica, get into shape, and impress scouts enough to command a six-million- dollar offer from the Yankees, who beat out Seattle, Anaheim, and Cleveland in the bidding. He had not pitched in over a year and had just endured draining physical and emotional trials. As he was to prove later, El Duque is not only an exceptional athlete, but a man of character and steely will.

Doctors who gave El Duque a physical before the 1998 season spring training said that he was the best-conditioned athlete they had ever examined. He had kept himself in shape during his year of banishment from competition in Cuba. Ironically, El Duque's conditioning and the knowledge of physical education that allowed him to stay sharp are a tribute to the Soviet-style athletic program of Cuba's sports system. His selection as a physical specimen, his training, and his education on the physiology of sports he probably owes to this. His acrobatic pitching motion, which some have mistakenly compared to Luis Tiant's gyrations, suggests the balance and ballet-like motions of a Soviet-trained gymnast. Whereas Tiant's windup was part showmanship, El Duque's is a controlled flexion and balancing of weight and force to propel the ball in the most efficient way, while hiding the pitch from the batter. But El Duque's determination and courage he owes only to himself, and they were the main factors in his success.

Called up to New York in June, with the season already in progress, El Duque walked into a typically pressure-packed Yankee operation, made more so because the team had not repeated as champions the year before. Liván Hernández's success in 1997 was nothing to scoff at, but it is one thing to play for an expansion team like the Marlins, and another to play for the most famous sports franchise in the world in the media capital of the United States. El Duque was under intense scrutiny from the moment he arrived, and he conducted himself with courage and poise on and off the field. Liván arrived in the United States young and impressionable and eventually fit into the mold of current ballplayers: spoiled, frenzied consumers who cannot see beyond the benefits coming to them for playing a child's game in public. El Duque, charismatic but serious and aware of his responsibilities beyond baseball, including the political ones, showed maturity and wisdom. He became the darling of Cuban fans in the United States, and in my September of 1998 trip to Cuba I discovered he had gained new respect and admiration among his fans on the island. Cubans realized that El Duque had proved himself on the most demanding of stages: with the champion New York Yankees in a World Series.

El Duque won 12 games during the season, but his greatest victories came in the crucible of the playoffs and World Series. With the Yankees down 2–1 to the Cleveland Indians in the American League Championship series, he won what his manager Joe Torre called the Yankees' most crucial game of the year. Had the Yankees lost that game and gone down 3–1, their chances of not reaching the World Series for the second year in a row

would have dangerously increased. For a team that had established a record number of wins during the season, not reaching the World Series would have been particularly crushing. Pitching with confidence under trying circumstances—in cold weather and on the road—El Duque put away the Indians, as he would the San Diego Padres in the World Series. El Duque's style, relying on shrewdness, control, and deception, is like that of Cuban pitching greats of yore, such as Luque, Bragaña, and Dihigo, and more recent stars like Pascual and Cuéllar. It is the conservative style of Cuban baseball, so unlike the stereotypes of Latin flamboyance bandied about in the United States, which are unfortunately assimilated by some of the Latin players. It remains to be seen whether El Duque will continue to enjoy success in 1999, when he will be thirty-four years old. But whatever happens, his feats in 1998 are worthy of those by José de la Caridad Méndez and others before, and will remain forever enshrined in Cuban memory.

The present shatters into inchoate images, yet to be structured by the plot-making of memory.

I am sitting in a box in the Gran Stadium on December 5, 1995, watching a game between Pinar del Río and Havana's Industriales. This is the very same box where thirty-six years earlier I caught the foul ball hit by the Dodgers' Dick Gray in an exhibition game between Los Angeles and the Cincinnati Reds. A middle-aged fan in front of me seems to know a great deal about baseball. We strike up a conversation. He does know his baseball, including the current major-league season. The man is a serious-looking mulatto in his mid fifties. He furrows his brow and looks at me for a moment, pausing before making a solemn pronouncement: "You know, there are a lot of assholes in this country who think that you'd want to leave Cuba if you knew more about American baseball. Imagine, when I have endured thirty-six years of this shit." Having thus established his seriousness, he says that Havana's Germán Mesa, who is the starting shortstop for the Cuban national team, is very good, but not as good as Willie Miranda, the defensive wizard who played for the Yankees, Orioles, and Almendares in the fifties. "After all, Miranda was a major leaguer." He has not lost a sense of perspective. This is the kind of hard, critical stance I remember Cuban fans having.

I also strike up a conversation with three kids in the next box. They turn out to be part of Cuba's baseball team of nine- and ten-year-olds that is leaving for Barranquilla, Colombia, tomorrow, to play in an international tournament. Raimel Garteix Suárez is a second baseman, Naidel Ayala is a shortstop and pitcher, and Dusnel Morán is the left fielder. (Where do parents come up with these names nowadays?) They boys are all products of baseball academies. I have never met three more knowledgeable ten-year old ballplayers in my life, and very few of any age with a better understanding of the game's nuances, not just who the stars are, or what so-and-so's

average was last year. These kids knew baseball strategy like seasoned professionals. A pitcher for Industriales threw what looked to me like a curve (one can tell by the change of speed) and I said something like, "Well, he threw him a curve in that spot," only to be corrected by Raimel, who tells me that it was too fast to be a curve, that it was a slider. I turn my head and give this little know-it-all a glance, but he is not cowed. He knows that he knows. When I asked him later why he was picked to be in a baseball academy, his answer came without hesitation: "Because I am good."

Could the best Little Leaguer in the United States know so much about baseball? I do not believe so, but the Little Leaguer would, I think, enjoy the game more. I am no advocate of the Little League, which I have always considered a form of entertainment for parents at the expense of their kids, but these Cuban ten-year-olds were hardened professionals. They have sold away their childhood much too early for the distant goal of making the national team. I am sure that their Cuban counterparts in Miami are under a great deal of pressure from foolish fathers who want them to be the next José Canseco. Nonetheless, the lives of these Cuban Americans are not completely taken up by the sport.

A measure of the deference shown to veterans of postrevolutionary baseball is that today's pitcher for Industriales is Agustín Marquetti's son. The middle-aged fan tells me that the only reason he is pitching is because of his father. The elder, retired Marquetti, a huge black with quite a few extra pounds around the middle, sits proudly nearby, surrounded by fawning fans and hangers-on. The young Marquetti is a tall, well-built right-hander who looks like a pitcher and has smooth motions, but is hit freely. Linares gets two singles off of him almost without trying. My learned friend turns around after the second one and mutters: *"No perdona."* (He shows no mercy.) The young Marquetti hung around until the seventh. The next day I heard on the radio about his "brilliant" performance. He has not graced the roster of any national team.

A few months later, on March 10, 1996, I am at Pro Player Stadium in Miami to watch Liván Hernández pitch for the Florida Marlins against the Toronto Blue Jays in a spring-training game. Liván is a tall, hefty black Cuban with a great deal of poise. He is only twenty-one years old, which is the reason why he commanded the highest bonus among the defectors. I am behind home plate, surrounded by Hispanic spectators, mostly Cubans, but also a few Nicaraguans, like the man next to me, an extremely knowledgeable fan. He says, with impressive poetic flair, that John Olerud, then the first baseman for the Blue Jays, has such a sweet swing that he "caresses the ball when he hits it." The Cuban fans are yelling at Angel Hernández (no relation to Liván), the umpire behind the plate, who happens to be a Cuban, too, from "the Republic of Hialeah," says my Nicaraguan friend sardonically.

Liván is impressive and then some. He allows no hits in four innings, picked off first one of the two men who got on base on errors (Cuban-

American Alex González), and even hit a double. He throws hard, but more importantly, he has great control within the strike zone with all his pitches. He dominated Joe Carter on changes of pace inside both times he faced him. It was a masterful performance. Though a mere exhibition, the Marlins advertised the game as if it meant something. They are clearly trying to cash in on Liván's appeal in the Cuban community. His next performance, in Puerto Rico against the Cleveland Indians, was not as good, and Liván was sent to the minors right before the season began.

It is December 2, 1996, and I am at what used to be the ballpark of the Vedado Tennis Club. It is almost at the Malecón—in other words, very near bayshore boulevard, to the west of Havana proper. A practice game *(tope)* is taking place between two teams from a baseball academy and a few independent players. I sat behind the backstop, where a number of adults, among them the baseball instructors, addressed as *profesores,* are sitting on cement blocks or whatever else is available. There is the usual bunch of idlers also watching and making comments. One of the professors is umpiring balls and strikes from his position behind the screen and offering advice and instruction to the hitter and the catcher. The boys, of all colors, are about fourteen years old.

The equipment is old and scarce. The two catchers share the one set of equipment, and there is a total of three rather used-up baseballs. The gloves look fine, though not new, and the shoes are well worn but serviceable. The aluminum bats are excellent (Japanese). There is a very high technical level and a relentless critique of play. The catchers are constantly reminded of how to ***mascotear*** in the right way, how to move the mitt properly. It reminds me of Corcho and some of my own instructors as a child in the provinces. I ask questions about the academy in a casual way. One of the boys tells me that someone goes to the primary schools in a given district and holds tryouts. The most promising boys are chosen to attend the baseball academy. They are transferred to these, where they receive daily instruction on baseball and all other subjects. Baseball in the morning, other subjects in the afternoon, and later practice. Every day. These boys, like the ones I met last year at the Latinoamericano, know a great deal about baseball, and the game is played by the book.

Somebody spanks a hard liner to center for a single, and the next batter dutifully and skillfully bunts toward third base. But the pitcher pounces on the ball, turns, and makes a perfect throw to second to try to get the lead runner. Just like a professional. But the play is very close, and the runner is called safe. There is no criticism of the pitcher, who made the right decision. The next boy hits a vicious line drive over the center fielder's head. The setup for the relay throw from the outfield is perfect, but the batter makes it around the bases for a home run. The pitcher stands on the mound with his hands on his hips, yelling at his center fielder for playing too shallow. But the outfielder was in close, hoping to nail the runner at the plate on a single, not because he is stupid or does not know the game.

He gambled and lost, like the pitcher himself on the earlier play, and shouts back a few choice words himself.

One of the professors is Ihosvanny Gallego Montano, a former pitcher for Occidentales (in 1967 he had an ERA of 0.80 in 67 innings). He is a slender mulatto in a dust-covered baseball outfit made up of sundry pieces. A well-spoken, terribly didactic individual, Ihosvanny intervenes when a loud argument erupts on the field over an alleged "balk." With a runner on second the pitcher, a right-hander, pivoted to the right and threw to try to pick the runner off at second. It was an unconventional way of doing this, for the right-hander usually steps off the rubber and pivots around to his left. The opposition claimed that the pitcher had balked. Professor Gallego walked slowly to the mound and conducted a clinic on the balk rule. He declared that there had been no balk. His ruling was accepted without further argument. Gallego is an intelligent man who projects a benevolent air of authority.

Somebody brings up Ihosvanny's exploits in the National Series, but he pretends to brush these off by saying that these are in the past and would not buy him a thing at the store today. But when goaded a little more he launches into a long, detailed reminiscence of some of his records and most memorable games. He remembered clearly a shutout he pitched on a Día de Reyes, after a long rain delay, with Fidel Castro in attendance. The game had to be played to please the *Comandante* no matter what the conditions of the field.

Gallego also intervenes in an argument among the players and spectators about a new directive that was being considered for all contests among and within the academies: that all batters would have to alternate sides of the plate on each turn at bat through the game to make them all switch-hitters. The discussion is highly technical. Gallego is skeptical about the plan. Why not cultivate a batter's natural or strong side instead of wasting time with the other? Besides, he says, other than a couple of steps to first base, what real advantage does a left-hander have? I opine, just to keep the discussion going, that left-handed batters see fewer left-handed pitchers because there are fewer southpaws; hence it follows that they would fare better by hitting from the right side against those they did see. But he answers that the opposite is true of righties, who would wind up hitting more often from their unnatural side. His clincher is that Ted Williams could hit righties and lefties the same, and I counter that he was the exception. I am not defending the intended directive, but I can see the theory behind it. It sounds like the rational kind of approach to sports that a Soviet-trained coach would concoct. In fact, it would be abhorrent to have all these boys sacrifice their natural talent and their chance of having fun just to make them better-trained performers, but that is what the academies are all about anyway.

I spent three afternoons at the Latinoamericano watching a series between Havana's Metropolitanos and Cienfuegos in December 1996. The

uniforms are chintzy, with adjustable caps, and the level of play seems to me to be below Double A in the United States. These are splendid afternoons, with the temperature in the high seventies, a mild breeze, and a few high clouds. I soon make several acquaintances. The first is Ernesto Morilla, a wiry old man who turns out to be a former professional who pitched briefly for the Habana Lions and the Cienfuegos Elephants of the Cuban League in the later forties and early fifties. He is obviously part of a group of mature fans and former ballplayers who spend their afternoons at the ballpark reminiscing and watching the game. I also met one of my boyhood favorites, though he played little for Habana, Asdrúbal Baró. Baró was a remarkable outfielder for Almendares, but mostly for Marianao and in the end for Habana. He was fast, good defensively, and hit about .300 with some power.

Baró is a very intelligent, well-spoken man, with an air of worldliness about him. He says that the level of play of what we are seeing is about Class C. He means obviously the Class C he knew and experienced in the United States as a player in the forties and fifties, which was quite good. I would venture to say that it is equivalent to today's Class A. Attendance at the stadium is very sparse, and the most vocal group, high in the stands behind home plate, are the bettors. They wager not only on the outcome of games but also on the run spread. This explains to me why they get all excited at what seems to be odd moments of the game. The few fans at the park are critical as ever. One gets up and yells in a booming voice after the Metropolitanos blow a relay throw: *"¡Caballeros, qué malos son ustedes!"* (Man, you guys are lousy!) Baró observes the proceedings with an air of benevolent condescension, but after a bonehead play cannot resist shouting, *"¡Ay, qué bruto eres, muchacho!"* (Boy, are you a dummy!)

The other friend I make is Raúl Esteban Pérez, who is a professor of physical education at the University of Havana and a sort of stadium manager. Fernando Padrón, the ballboy, comes to ask him for new baseballs when the plate umpire complains that he is running short. Pérez is a thoughtful, well-spoken black man with graying hair. He is a true gentleman. His son is playing center field for the Metropolitanos. He, Baró, and Morilla are buddies who meet every afternoon here. They all know their baseball extremely well, but Pérez is a true scholar of the game and knows more than I do about current major-league play. I am stunned by his precise, detailed knowledge of Cuban ballplayers in the majors. On our second meeting he produces a huge sheet, with neatly drawn lines, where he has listed every Cuban who ever played in the major leagues, with statistics, years of service, and everything one would want to know. The whole thing, done by hand, looks like an old-fashioned ledger book from a store. How does he get the information? People bring him magazines, a friend gives him the tape from an old news-ticker machine whenever he sees something on baseball, and he watches some CNN and other programs with friends who have satellite dishes. The ones who have these charge to let people

watch games, such as the World Series, of which Pérez saw a few games. He launches into a paean for Rafael Palmeiro and other current Cuban major leaguers, such as José Canseco. I tell him that Jorge Fuentes told me that the Cuban national team would give a good show against a major-league all-star team. He looks up and rolls his eyes until all I see are the whites and mutters: "The delusions that people suffer here are sometimes incredible."

The game in front of us was getting interesting, as the Metropolitanos threaten to even the score in the ninth—they are two behind. With runners on first and third they try a double steal, but the catcher throws to the pitcher, who throws back to him, and the runner at third is hung up in a rundown until he is tagged out. A journalist friend of my friends runs over, holding his head with both hands: "What a childish play; this is shameful." Another runner gets on, and Jorge Sanfrán, a large, right-handed batter, hits one late but deep to right. It lands in the stands, and the game is over. He is met at home by the entire team while Cienfuegos retreats to the dugout.

There were very few women and children at the stadium. It is true that the game is being played on a school day, in the early afternoon, but I have the feeling that baseball continues to be the adult male ritual that it has been in Cuba since the turn of the century. Once the game ceased to be a Sunday amusement for the well-to-do, it became a male contest involving a man's self-image, be it by his prowess as a player or by how much he knows about the game. Baseball became, since then, something like smoking cigars—slightly sinful, pleasurable, and male. Betting is another feature that removes it from the world of children and women. In this sense baseball is closer to cock-fighting and other male-dominated activities in which betting prevails.

Proofs of this are the notorious baseball *tertulias*—informal gatherings to talk about something that all present know passionately. There is one at Parque Central, in front of the famed Hotel Inglaterra, right under the statue of José Martí. The other is at a cafeteria called La Esquina Caliente (The Hot Corner), on 23 and 12 in Vedado. At the other end of the island, in Santiago, there is one at the Campo de Marte. Tertulias began in Spain in the eighteenth century and continue to the present in the Hispanic world. They are gatherings—cenacles—usually at cafés, where men for the most part discuss politics and literature, but in some only bullfighting. The baseball gathering at Parque Central takes place on the park's stone benches, but people mostly stand up. It is in continuous session every day from morning until late into the night. It is a large group of thirty people more or less, divided up into smaller discussion groups, but there always seems to be a main clique in which a big argument is taking place. Cubans do not say that they are going to *hablar de pelota* (talk about baseball), but to *discutir de pelota* (argue about baseball), so this institution is a natural outcome. To anyone not familiar with this custom, or

with the volume and vehemence of a Cuban argument, the tertulia sounds like a fight is about to break out and that someone ought to call the police. Everyone is male, and while the color varies, I found in my visits that blacks and mulattoes predominate. In fact, I was warned by someone at the Writers' Union, a black himself, not to go there too late and alone for fear of the *negrada*—the bunch of blacks, an expression that goes back to the nineteenth century, when it referred to the group of slaves at a sugar-mill. The topics vary, but they center mostly on second-guessing managers or on who is or who has been the best at a given position, who should or should not have been included on an all-star or a national team, and so forth. The arguments on strategy are of a very sophisticated technical level. Only the ballplayers among the baseball commentators in the United States would stand a chance in this assembly of baseball scholars and theoreticians. Male pride is clearly involved in winning arguments and in simply *saber de pelota* (knowing about baseball). There were a few boys around when I visited the tertulia, but they would not dare to participate. They were learning by listening to their elders, waiting until they were older, when they would be able to jump into the fray.

Back at the stadium I ask Baró about his cane. He tells me that he had to have a hip-replacement operation and is convalescing. He walks slowly, leaning on the cane, but with great dignity. Aging is particularly painful in an athlete. It is not only that he loses his means of support, but also the ability that made him unique vanishes, leaving him an old man like any other. A frail Ted Williams, a tottering Joe DiMaggio, an emaciated Mantle are sad spectacles indeed. They are heroes who have suffered the worst of defeats, not at the hands of formidable enemies, but to the relentless, ordinary passage of time, like everybody else. Bodies that were once the wonder of multitudes turned into wrecks by age. I have seen my share of such spectacles in writing this book.

I will never forget peering through a window of Edmundo Amorós' apartment in Tampa, with Agapito Mayor, to see if the old hero of the 1955 World Series is awake. Every day, Mayor brought him a meal from a nearby restaurant with take-out service and cleaned up the apartment for him. I was deeply moved by Mayor's kindness, which he displayed without fuss, as if he were performing the most routine of chores. Once inside we find a withered figure, missing a leg from the knee down (diabetes), and with the ashen color of poor health. He speaks softly of leaving Cuba, of getting an offer to play in some independent league in Canada because they still remembered him there from his salad days with the Montreal Royals. But he knew that he was through, he says. His artificial leg is propped up against the wall. A small television set blares with some adventure movie. Mayor is puttering about, picking up things, tidying up. He has run Amorós to the hospital several times and is in touch with one of Amorós' daughters in Miami. In 1992 this forgotten boy of summer died.

Mayor, on the other hand, is still spry and vigorous, and when I first

visited him, he had pitched batting practice to some youngsters. One can still see in his Popeye-like forearms the strength of a professional athlete. He became a house painter in Florida, worked a bit as a bird dog for the Twins, saw his daughter get married, and now lives modestly and without regret. Gloria, his wife of fifty years, still runs the house. Agapito, as white as can be, keeps his Afro-Cuban altar in the bedroom and pulls a red handkerchief from his pocket when I ask him what a *resguardo* (a protective talisman) is. Glad to reminisce about the past, he runs to the phone and calls Max Lanier in Dunellon. They gab about the past in grunts and scattered phrases. Mayor has not picked up much English.

The hulking giant Claro Duany, who blasted tape-measure homers out of La Tropical, is bent over and sick, also from diabetes. He has had one kidney removed. His neat little apartment in Evanston, Illinois, is very modest. The only other member of the family who comes out to meet us is a dog. Duany speaks softly, with the wisdom of age. A man who won the batting championship in the Mexican and Cuban Leagues in the same year, who had his share of glory with the New York Cubans, Duany is saddened by the way his business failed after baseball. He talks of a truck he had bought in Cuba and had to leave behind; then of the truck he crashed in the United States, which put him out of a job. A gentleman of flawless manners, he offers to call a taxi for me when the interview is over. He asks me to give warm regards to any friends of his I meet in my travels. I have recently learned that Duany passed away.

Rafael Noble is another diabetic. I catch the ceremonial first pitch he throws in a veterans' game at Roosevelt Stadium in New Jersey. He also seems to have shrunk, and one of his legs has been amputated, like Amorós'. That night, at the banquet, he tells me that he considered letting himself die rather than having his leg severed, but that he is glad he had changed his mind. Noble is well-spoken, serious, soberly dressed. Thousands of innings behind the plate in leagues from the sugarmills in Cuba to the National League, the Negro Leagues, the International and Pacific Coast Leagues, calling the pitches for the likes of Pedro Ramos and Camilo Pascual with Cienfuegos, have given him a wealth of experience and worldliness.

I visited the legendary Dick Sisler in a nursing home in Nashville, Tennessee. It was a plush affair, but a nursing home. I will never understand why Sisler, still tall and vigorous, was there. At the nursing home I spoke quietly with the slugger who had clouted three in a game against Maglie at La Tropical, and had propelled some balls to unimaginable distances in that vast yard. He told me how Pasquel had wanted to sign him for a fabulous sum, but that his "daddy" (none other than Hall of Fame member George Sisler, under whose shadow he played) advised him against it. He remembered taking a tour of Cuba by car, and how nice people had been to him. He seemed a bit confused about the years, but perked up at the

mention of Agapito Mayor to recall the titanic homer he had hit off of him fifty years before.

Rodolfo Fernández is a proud gentleman, slowed down by age but quick and sharp of mind. He and his wife received me and mine in their modest Manhattan apartment. Rodolfo was not only a superb pitcher but also a smart coach and manager. In addition, he was a keen judge of talent, not easily impressed. I asked him if he had seen the Cuban national team on television and what he thought of them. He is skeptical, he said. Most of those players had already peaked, he thought, and would not make the majors. I saw him again at the veterans' game where I caught Noble's pitch. An old, paunchy Marcelino López was huffing and puffing on the mound. Rodolfo opined with his sharp wit: *"A Marcelino nada más le queda el casco y la mala idea."* (Marcelino only has left the shell and the shrewdness.) We correspond, and his letters are written not only in impeccable Spanish, but also in a beautiful script that he complains is not what it used to be because his hands now tremble.

Quilla Valdés uses a walker. Never robust, he is now a gaunt old man in obvious poor health. Quilla is delighted to reminisce, and quite willing to explain the anomaly that a man of his talents and accomplishments never turned professional. He is happy to attend softball games of the Quilla Valdés League in Miami, but cannot go when the weather is cool, he says. He has hardly any memorabilia, having left most, if not all of it, in Cuba when he came into exile. Looking at current major-league baseball, he is sure he could have played at that level, and he decries the lack of effort by some of the better-paid players. Quilla reminded me of Don Quijote as he raised his skinny right arm to show me how he would finish each practice session by standing at home plate and hurling a ball over the left-field fence.

Perhaps the most bizarre post-baseball career was that of Pedro (Perico) Formental, my boyhood hero, whom I could never locate. I was told in Madrid by the distinguished Cuban poet Gastón Baquero, who was born and raised in the same region of Oriente Province as Formental and Batista, that Perico had wound up in Spain, where he lived for a while with Sungo Carrera, a former Almendares manager. They subsisted on public charity provided by other Cuban exiles and the Spanish government. One afternoon, when all they had left was a baseball glove they planned to pawn, they were sitting at an outdoor café, pondering what to do next. There they were spotted by movie producer Samuel Bronston, in Spain to make one of his epic films. He approached the two Cuban blacks and told them that he needed extras of their color for a project he was working on. He hired them on the spot, and both worked as voodoo priests in one film, and later as extras in battle scenes of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Once these jobs were over, Formental went to see Baquero, who suggested he go seek Batista's help in Estoril, Portugal, where the former sergeant had a home. The exiled general was, after all, their compatriot and both the

poet and the player had been his followers. Formental showed up at Batista's complex, but the guards refused to let him in, whereupon he started to shout at the top of his lungs: "Batista, Perico Formental is here!" Eventually Batista emerged, let him in, and gave him money to buy passage to the United States. The last I heard was that the Habana center fielder was earning his living in Chicago as a ***babalao,*** an Afro-Cuban priest. Apparently, he has died.

Other than Amorós, who was in no condition to be interviewed formally, four other men I talked to died as I wrote this book, as far as I know: Fermín Guerra, Claro Duany, Quilla Valdés, and Napoleón Reyes. Guerra looked frail, and a stroke had affected his speech slightly. But he remembered everything and was still upbeat about his fistfight with the immensely bigger Don Newcombe: "I was tough," Guerra said. At the end of the interview a grandson chimed in to say that he was so proud that his grandfather had been able to accomplish so much being illiterate. I was startled. This man, who had managed successfully in Cuba and elsewhere, who was a leader in his time, could not read and write? His wife, the sister of Regino (Reggie) Otero, explained with some embarrassment that she had taught Fermín how to write his name to sign contracts and autographs, and then eventually how to read and write a little. Massive Napoleón Reyes was a shadow of his former self, limping and breathing with some difficulty. But his green eyes sparkled as he reminisced about his good times in Mexico, playing for Pasquel, and his exploits as an amateur playing for the University of Havana. He had finished a degree in chemical engineering. He told me with moist eyes the moving story reproduced in chapter 6 about his arrival in the United States.

It is uncanny to hear these men's words on tape, knowing that they are truly disembodied voices. They have become something that has only been possible in our century: oral relics. As I write these final words I marvel at how many games have been played in Cuba since Nemesio Guilló returned to the island with a ball and a bat in his student's trunk, and I wonder about the many days that have since then fallen forever into time.

Notes

Chapter One

1. *For Want of a Horse: Choice & Chance in History,* ed. by John M. Merriman (Lexington, Mass: The Stephen Greene Press, 1985), p. x.

2. It is unlikely that the game took place the day before because November 27 is a day of national mourning in Cuba, commemorating the death by firing squad of several medical students during the Spanish regime. Of course, given that Castro is such a common surname, the "F. Castro" in the box score could be someone else.

3. The final irony in all this is that even a reference work, the *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Leagues,* has Clint Thomas hitting "a home run off a young pitching prospect named Fidel Castro, who would later lead a revolution and become president of Cuba" (p. 774). Since Thomas played in Cuba from 1923 to 1931 and Fidel Castro was born in 1926, that pitching prospect was really young when he gave up the homer. A book that advertises itself as "Baseball's Ultimate Biographical Reference," *The Ballplayers,* edited by Mike Shatzkin, devotes an entry to Fidel Castro (p. 169). Like malignant cells, misinformation is hard to kill.

4. Her name was Isora del Castillo, a Cuban third baseman for the Chicago Collens, of the Women's Baseball League in the forties. Born in Regla, near Havana, in 1932, she was the daughter of a great shortstop in the Amateur League, Argelio de Castillo. Known as "Chica" and "Pepper," she played in 1949 and 1950. A singer, she was often called upon to croon "Quiéreme mucho" before games. *The Pinch Scotch Whiskey Cuban Baseball Hall of Fame Gala,* June 28, 1997, a pamphlet with biographies of inductees and other interesting materials.

Chapter Two

1. Durocher had first come to Havana in the thirties as a member of the Gas House Gang (the St. Louis Cardinals), and later, in 1941, as manager of the Dodgers, when he staged a riotous protest in a spring-training game against a Cuban selection at La Tropical. He was tossed from the game by the legendary Cuban