

Todos los niños nacen con un guante en sus manos: a comparison of baseball's politics in Cuba and Venezuela

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Abstract

Baseball, the quintessential American pastime, has a history with Latin America that dates back nearly as long as the game itself. Because of the widespread appeal of baseball and its general ability to unify people of all sorts, it has been used as a political force in dictatorial regimes throughout the sport's history. Latin America was routinely strip-mined of baseball talent beginning in the 1930's because it was a source of low-priced, talented ballplayers; it is disappointing that this situation seems to have improved only marginally in some ways. In Venezuela, there are "baseball academies" that hoard the best of the country's young teenage talent and often deprive them of an opportunity to go to school. Cuba has taken its own road, but since the defection of star pitcher Rene Arocha shook the island in 1991, talent has been trickling into the U.S. through circuitous routes (often with a stopover in the Dominican Republic to avoid the embargo issue). What can be done to mitigate or eliminate the risks these ballplayers take to join the MLB? Unfortunately, there are powerful forces standing in the way of finding real answers — there is much more money to be made for American agents and franchises with the current imperfect system than there ever could be with a reformed one.

Keywords: baseball, Venezuela, Cuba, defection, U.S. – Cuba embargo

In an ESPN article that was posted online during May 2012, the improbable, feel-good tale began with the gushy lede: "For a guy who's barely tall enough to see over the dugout railing, Houston Astros second baseman José Altuve certainly has a knack for growing on people" (Crasnick, 2012, par. 1). Baseball writer Jerry Crasnick recounted how the Latin element on both the team and in the city of Houston adopted the stubborn, statuesque (5'5") Venezuelan (Crasnick, 2012, par. 5); articles like these are a testament to the national melting pot, to the underdog, and half-a-dozen other ideals that are ingrained in American culture.

Every once in awhile, Major League Baseball (MLB) gives us a José Altuve, the Latino second baseman who will no doubt serve as inspiration for every young South American ballplayer who dreams of the well-off life of the American athlete. But those would-be Major Leaguers have plenty standing in their way — and maybe they always have. Consider, for example, the tangled baseball history of Venezuela and its interesting class distinctions.

Venezuela: Aristocracy on the Diamond

Venezuela has an interesting history with baseball, because it seems to have arrived there through a convergence of circumstances. The first suggests that the U.S., operating under 1812's Monroe Doctrine, brought baseball via the Marines to all of Latin America. At the time, Venezuela was very much on the White House's mind, as the political interests of the United States lay in an "independent" Latin America — that is, independent of Spanish, if not American, influence (Yiannakis & Melnick, 2001). One also cannot ignore the time period in which the game became wildly popular in Venezuela: the 1890's. This coincides neatly with Cuba's War of Independence in 1902, which meant interaction with yet another nation that had been baseball-crazy for years (Karras, 1974). There are many conflicting reports — especially given, as Elizabeth Burgos (2002) of L'Université de Toulouse-de-Mirail puts it, the "imperial American stranglehold" (par. 3) on Latin America — but the game would seem to have been well established in Venezuela even before American economic interests became prevalent in the country during the 20th century.

However, the *début* 1914 squad wasn't just any baseball team. The country's dictator, Juan Vincent Gómez, made sure of it. The inaugural players were young men descended from the country's aristocracy, including the young Machado brothers: Gustavo, Eduardo, and Roberto. The three of them also belonged to a very prominent tennis league, and added baseball to their list of well-heeled social activities.

In this case, as the country's beloved baseball went, so did national politics. Venezuela's cultural love for class distinction put the country more and more at odds with distant cousin Cuba — during this period, in fact, according to Doug Yarrington, Venezuela was undergoing sweeping land privatization that gave the oligarchy nearly complete control and “turned peasant settlers into estate tenants,” (1994, pg. 34) — a lucrative state of affairs, when one considers Venezuela's booming coffee crop. This particular attitude did not agree with the Machados', however, who went on to help found the Cuban Communist Party during an exile in Havana in 1925. They were able to do the same at home, later establishing the Venezuelan Communist Party in 1931. It is noteworthy that peasants in Duaca — located in western Venezuela — began to protest this sort of treatment from the upper classes about five years later, in 1936 (Yarrington, 1994).

The death of Vincent Gómez in 1936 meant a wave of extreme change in Venezuela, both in daily life and on the baseball diamond. New leader Eleazar López Contreras unveiled a plan to modernize Venezuela — and that included new stadiums for a baseball-crazy public. By 1939, the reign of professional baseball in Venezuela had begun, and the 1940's are still considered to be one of the “golden eras” of the game. Burgos, quoted earlier, believes that baseball has been a catalyst for equality in Venezuela: “the idea of borrowing [the game] refers to a position of action, to taking initiative...Undoubtedly, the popularity of baseball has been a force for democracy, as a way to share and converge different social strata.” (Burgos, 2002, par. 19).

Cuba, on its own journey during this era, sought equality for all citizens through bloody revolution after revolution. But this well-known socialist enclave clung tightly to the ideals of communism — was there any room for baseball in Fidel Castro's new Cuba?

Cuba: Baseball as a Constitutional Right

Almost as long as American baseball players have known how to swing a bat or throw a pitch, their Cuban counterparts have been doing the same. Baseball traces its origins to the outskirts of New York City around the time of the American Civil War (1860-1865), but baseball had crossed the Florida Straits to the nearby island of Cuba — possibly via the Cuban Ten Years War — by 1874 (Burgos, 2002).

While Venezuela went so far as to field a team made up entirely of the oligarchy, the Cubans' baseball politics leaned in the other direction: the post-Revolution belief was that sports should be accessible to all, regardless of status or economics. The Cubans even went so far as to write this into the 1976 Constitution: Article 8 states that “as the power of the people and for the people, guarantees that no one be left without access to studies, culture, and sports” (República de Cuba Constitución Política, 1976, Art. 8b). Article 38 follows up with the promise that “the state promotes, foments, and develops physical education and sports in all their forms” (Constitución Política, 1976, Art. 38 Sec. 1; Pye, 1986, pg. 119).

This was a fascinating development, given the Cuban love of neo-Marxist ideas. Though Karl Marx did not deny that physical training provided benefits, he frowned upon professional sports because of the competition and elitism they foster (Rojek & Dunning, 1993). Cuba's ideas differ a bit from those in other socialist nations because they seek to constantly stir up *esprit de corps* and collectivism — in other words, a people free of capitalist leanings who would work for one another and the State (a concept that Che Guevara particularly emphasized). Again, this attitude is best seen on the baseball diamond, the perfect place to gather citizens together in a united cause. *The Journal of Sports History* (1986) notes:

Cuba is ideologically committed to mass participation in sport for the purposes of health and all-round development. Sport also reflects and encourages the ideology of the Cuban Revolution through promoting collectivist ideas and the development of the attitudes of the new man. Cuba's leaders maintain a belief in many traditional values of sport, including health, discipline and character building. Competition, despite the neo-marxist arguments against it, has not been eliminated in Cuba; it is in fact, viewed as the life-blood of sport. (Pye, 1986, pg. 126)

On paper, this all seems quite clear; in practice, however, things get much more muddled. Being a Cuban baseball star did come with its privileges (the use of a car, for example), which would seem to run contrary to an egalitarian, socialist society (Nomai & Dionisopoulos, 2002). Much of that changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Cuba was forced to shift its economy to allow for some 4 billion that the erstwhile U.S.S.R. used to pump into its economy yearly, and by 1993 the U.S. dollar was legalized (Greller, 1999; Frankel, 2005). Would ballplayers still be able to carve out a cozy niche in Castro's reeling Cuba? Or would some of baseball's finest talent finally find its way to the United States?

The answer is a thorny one for Latino ballplayers, and, perhaps surprisingly, it has little to do with Cuba's brand of socialism; in fact, it's a tale of what happens when unregulated, U.S.-based capitalism goes badly off the rails. To understand why many incredibly talented Hispanic baseball players don't find an easy way out with the MLB, one must first know the history behind Latin American recruiting — and the story begins with tropical fruit.

Baseball and Pineapple

If one would like to know how the U.S. felt about Latin American baseball players during the early 20th century, one need only observe how they imported their pineapples and bananas. The connection? The production workforce: impoverished, Spanish-speaking, and plentiful. British and American economic interests rode roughshod over Latin America during the era — the United Fruit Company, of Boston, was one notorious example. From Costa Rica to British Honduras (later Belize), cut-rate tropical fruits were exported to hungry Americans at rock-bottom prices, mostly owing to the fact that the produce had started its journey in Third World agricultural facilities (Gillhodès, 1967). United Fruit demanded 150 days' worth of unpaid labor instead of taxes from its workers, and is credited with masterminding both stays of power and *coups d'état* for repressive dictators as it suited their needs (Regalado, 2000). An impressionable young Che Guevara — passing through Guatemala in 1954 — was shocked to watch President Jacobo Arbenz deposed, with the blessing of the Eisenhower Administration, for daring to challenge United Fruit's vast land claims (Artaud, 1999).

Into this toxic *mêlée* of sports, neocolonialism, and good, old-fashioned American paternalism stepped Branch Rickey. Rickey is, of course, one of baseball's patron saints, revered in the United States because of his contribution to the country's decades-long Civil Rights struggle. "Branch Rickey is most remembered as the president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers who broke the color line in baseball," writes Robert D. Behn of Duke University (1997, pg. 2), "[i]t was a uniquely American game — except that it was all white. Rickey set out to change that" (pg. 2).

Rickey set out to change things in more ways than one. American baseball was becoming an expensive endeavor in the 1930's, what with star players negotiating sky-high salaries or (even worse) pitting two scouts against one another in a bidding war (Regalado, 2000, pg. 12). Soon Rickey's search for economic relief led him to the *béisbol paradiso* of Latin America, where the simple promise of life in the Major Leagues was enough to lure Hispanic talent from abject poverty in droves. Dr. Samuel O. Regalado (2000) comments in *The Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*:

Characterized by [celebrated St. Louis Cardinals scout] Kevin Kerrane as a 'manipulative' operator, Rickey introduced the use of non-binding agreements, which he called 'desk contracts.' Rickey taught his scouts the art of 'signing thousands of amateurs on a purely

tentative basis.' Utilizing this 'quality out of quantity' principle, players, upon being signed, were sent to various outposts where they were 'scouted at [a] greater leisure, and, perhaps...released a few weeks later without money for transportation home.'" (pg. 11-12)

While teams obviously did very well for themselves following this model, Latino players were often left holding English-language documents that were "undated, non-binding, and useless" (Regalado, 2000, pg. 11). Little attention was paid to the new recruits' adjustment into North American life, and the contracts that had brought them there were structured so badly that there was very little working in their favor at all. "Remarkably," Regalado notes, "this exploitative process was started by a person whose legacy is that of a great humanitarian." (2000, pg. 11)

Baseball's Prisoners and Baseball's Liberated

Baseball writer Milton Jamail once observed that "there is not a kid in the Caribbean who does not reach his 14th birthday without being seen by a major-league team" (Vargas, 2000, pg. 24). Today, Cuba and Venezuela are both baseball powerhouses with much to offer the MLB. But how do their ballplayers arrive in the U.S. in the modern era?

In Venezuela, it's questionable if things have changed much from the days of United Fruit and Rickey's specious "desk contracts" (Regalado, 2000, pg. 12). Angel Vargas is the head of the Venezuelan Baseball Players Association — a small league of six teams — and the General Secretary of the Caribbean Baseball Players Confederation. Though his love of the game runs deep, he has written extensively about the abuse and mistreatment of young boys at the hands of the MLB. He explains:

Historically, initial contacts with Latino children were made by MLB team scouts. Scouts often rely on people known as *buscónes* to help them comb the country for baseball talent. Often the initial contacts are innocent, involving a scout or *buscón* making favorable comments to parents about a child's performance in a youth league game and giving them his card...With very talented children, the initial contacts can be more serious and intense, involving gifts of uniforms, bats, gloves, and money, or an invitation to attend a baseball academy where the child can train at a big-league facility. Many times the academy is used to hide talented children who are too young to sign from other team scouts and *buscónes*. (Vargas, 2000, pg. 84)

Vargas reports that young recruits are actually being hoarded with such intensity that it is undermining the *criollitos*, or youth leagues (2000). Other writers seem to agree with Vargas' assessment of the situation that MLB clubs are, in essence, hiding their best "finds" from other teams behind the walls of baseball academies so that they are not stolen away and placed under contract with a competing club (Klein, 1995; Spagnulo, 2003).

What is life like inside of a baseball academy? The word "academy" would seem to denote an erudite, upscale environment, but unfortunately in most Latin American countries — Venezuela being one of the most notorious — exactly the opposite is true. At an age when education is crucial, underage boys (some as young as 12 years old) who cannot be signed to contracts are cloistered behind its walls, without an opportunity to attend school. This also means that 13- and 14-year-old children are routinely expected to compete in workouts made for older, stronger 17-year-olds. There are extremely troubling complaints brought to light by Vargas about basic medical care and the often-squalid condition of these so-called "academies" (Vargas, 2000; Koble, 2008). According to Papi Bisono, a former baseball commissioner in the Dominican Republic, "[i]t almost seemed like they were concentration camps" (as cited by Regalado, 2000).

Recruiting in Cuba would be no simple matter, thanks to the U.S. – Cuba embargo. When the Los Angeles Dodgers were caught scouting in Cuba in 1996 they immediately forfeited the rights to promising young players Josué Perez and Juan Carlos Diaz (Cwiertney, 2000, pg. 393). The Dodgers proceeded to smooth out the mess by encouraging the recruits to defect to the Dominican Republic — which is absolutely permissible under MLB rules — using a ruse in which two women lied to

Cuban officials, posing as the players' Dominican girlfriends who had invited them to visit their country (one of the women was actually the cousin of a Dodgers employee). The trick worked, and upon arriving in the Dominican Republic, Perez and Diaz both signed contracts with the Dodgers — for \$40,00 and \$65,000, respectively — at the Campo Las Palmas baseball academy (Cwiertney, 2000, pg. 394). It's a remarkable tale on several fronts: not only were the two recruits bilked out of several million dollars in bonuses that the market would have borne in the mid-1990s, but the Los Angeles Dodgers were actually encouraged to break international law because of the current political climate and the MLB's long-standing chilly relationship with Cuba (Cwiertney, 2000, pgs. 404-405).

Fortunately for the MLB, circumstances made things much simpler for the League: after Cuba began to feel the economic squeeze of the U.S.S.R.'s collapse in the 1990's, restless baseball stars began to imagine what life would be like across the Florida Straits. It was Rene Arocha, a 10-year veteran of the Cuban National Team, who became the first player to defect from Cuba on July 10, 1991 during an international match-up with the Baltimore Orioles at Camden Yards (Frankel, 2005, pg. 383). Arocha's account of his daring is underwhelming: according to him, all he needed to do in Miami International Airport was "look for an exit sign" (Frankel, 2005, pg. 383). In reality, the mental struggle must have been wrenching; the star pitcher feared backlash from the Cuban government for his disloyalty, as he still had family on the island (Greller, 1999). Once separated from his Cuban teammates, however, Arocha was able to make an immediate request for political asylum in the United States. The MLB held a special draft open to all franchises with an interest in Arocha.

The floodgates didn't exactly open, but Arocha had started something big. Within the next few years, the MLB would be forced to hold a special draft for four more talented Cuban ballplayers, although Ariel Prieto's entry into the 1995 amateur draft would be the last example of a Cuban coming to the major leagues directly. Others would begin to find their way here through more circuitous routes.

The most roundabout defection model (and the most dangerous) was made famous by Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez. El Duque is celebrated in the Cuban-American community for his well-known hatred of Castro and his deep love of the game. He also has a life story right out of a Hollywood script: banned from the Cuban leagues after the defection of his younger half-brother, Livian, veteran ballplayer El Duque grew sick of constant interrogations and harassment by the government and decided to board a small boat bound for the Bahamas in December 1997. He was immediately arrested upon arrival. Livian's agent, Joe Cubas, expedited El Duque's release from the Bahamian jail with a Costa Rican political-asylum visa — but Costa Rica was hardly the last stop Cubas had in mind for his new client. Within one year, he also managed to herd El Duque into the United States, onto the New York Yankees, and into a \$6.6 million contract (Nomai & Dionisopoulos, 2002). Incredibly, El Duque's Yankees swept the San Diego Padres in the 1998 World Series (Anderson & Andrew, 2006).

With such a rags-to-riches story endorsing his voyage, El Duque unwittingly made travel by boat, though risky, a now-viable option for Cubans looking for a shot in the MLB. But there was an even more important (though highly risky) lesson for young ballplayers: El Duque's passage through other countries also meant that he'd managed to neatly sidestep the embargo issue. Under an arrangement like Joe Cubas', when a player establishes residency in a country besides Cuba before coming to the United States he can enter the MLB as high-priced free agents (as El Duque did) rather than in an amateur or special draft. Due to the political challenges, most players now set up residency for themselves in the Dominican Republic for six months before coming to the U.S. — thus avoiding the messy embargo problem (Frankel, 2005).

Why Can't We All Just Play Ball?

In 1999, attorney Matthew N. Greller wrote: "Recent statements from Cuban officials indicate a willingness by Cuba to allow its players to compete in MLB, provided that any new arrangement

respects Cuban socialist sports" (pg. 1699). Unfortunately, this comment came in the midst of one of the most economically flush eras the U.S. had ever seen — and during an MLB season that would culminate in another World Series for the New York Yankees, who had also operated with the highest (\$197 million) payroll that year — which does not speak to a unification of ideals between nations.

America is deeply commercialist, and sports just might be their most indulgent, capitalist shrine. It is not surprising that Fidel Castro finds his country's talent drain to be embarrassing and, as a baseball fan himself, infuriating. It is yet another problem that embitters relations between the two countries. With the two governments consistently so disparate over the years, good ideas on how to heal the breach have been few and far between.

In his 2000 law review, Scott M. Cweirtny made a strong case for a worldwide draft. With the LA Dodgers incident of 1996 and El Duque's 1997 defection saga still fresh in recent memory, Cweirtny (2000) wrote:

The lure of money always has and always will outweigh the risks of taking advantage of the loophole. The damaging effect of the loophole is present and real. Nations and their citizens are being exploited...The cost of implementing this solution is small in comparison to the harm that has already been inflicted. (pg. 428)

It's very possible that, if one were to imagine a color-blind, international baseball utopia completely without borders, then a worldwide draft would be exactly what's needed. In practice, player agents make far more money inducing their Cuban recruits to settle in another country for a few months to establish residency so they can sign as high-priced free agents and not as amateurs — or, if they sign directly with an MLB franchise while residing in a secondary country, it is usually at a discount of millions of dollars for the club in question. It's a system that, one imagines, not many baseball insiders are in a hurry to see broken.

There is a bit of good news on the part of Venezuela. Though it is a nation that, until recently, remained under the control of popular socialist leader Hugo Chávez (an avid baseball fan) the reprehensible — and illegal — MLB recruiting practices remain. But some "baseball academies" have, within the past few years, at least begun to see upgrades. More teams have seen the need to invest in the infrastructure of their vital Latin American training centers — a sign, perhaps, that better things could be on the way after nearly 80 years of lopsided recruiting practices (Spagnolo, 2003).

The U.S. now receives its baseball players the way it receives its morning coffee: they're often imported from South America and the Caribbean. Of course, just like any other product brought in as cheaply as possible, this often comes with an upset of political balance and no small amount of slippery economics. The perversions in this force for unity, teamwork, and togetherness — twisting it far too often into a vehicle for political agenda and international discord — have become shockingly common. Baseball has allowed men to walk free from governments with which they disagreed; it has also held others captive in their own country. The future of the game rests heavily on the continually evolving political intrigue of the Americas.

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