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Sports Geography

April 16th 2024

Research Project

### Between Bases and Borders

From the sun-drenched diamonds of Havana to the iconic stadiums of Major League Baseball, the journey for Cuban athletes is a path defined by resilience, talent, and the influence of enduring political tensions. While the United States and Cuba navigate their complex political relationship filled with economic barriers and diplomatic disputes, Cuban athletes find themselves in the intersection of geopolitics, economics, and sports while aspiring to pursue their dreams of playing professionally.

The story of US and Cuban relations started when Cuba sought independence from Spanish Rule (Román, 2021). Since Cuba's fight for independence, America has attempted to shape the development of the nation through military interventions, political entanglements, and economic embargoes. Throughout these countries' history of tension and strife, baseball has served as a unifying force that transcends borders and barriers and has become a shared symbol of culture.

Sports hold a special place in Cuban culture, serving as a source of national pride. In a country



Figure 1: Kids playing baseball in street in Cuba

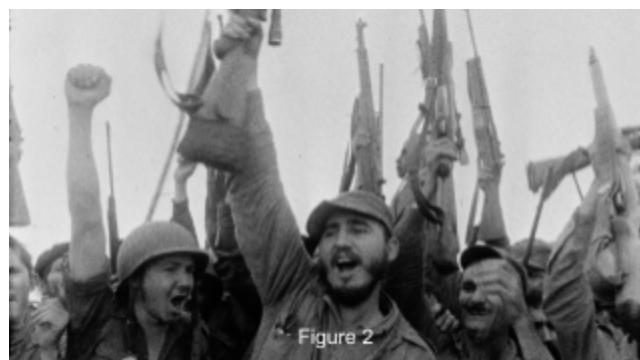
where commercial entertainment options are limited, youth can often be found filling the streets with spontaneous games of soccer, volleyball, and baseball (Figure 1.).

Baseball specifically has been an integral part of Cuban culture since the sport was introduced to the country in the late nineteenth century. Cubans embraced baseball with enthusiasm seeing it as a fresh cultural expression that distinguished them from their Spanish colonial past (Doherty, 2012). From neighborhood sandlots to grand stadiums, the sport is woven into the fabric of everyday life, serving as a source of joy, passion, and identity for millions of Cubans. For aspiring athletes, baseball represents not only a pathway to personal success but also a symbol of hope and opportunity in the face of adversity.

This research paper examines the influence of political tensions between Cuba and the United States on the aspirations of Cuban athletes seeking careers in Major League Baseball (MLB). It delves into the evolving dynamics of the US-Cuba relationship over time and investigates how these tensions shape the opportunities and challenges faced by Cuban athletes in pursuing their MLB dreams. By analyzing the intersection of geopolitics, economics, and sports, the study aims to uncover the broader implications of this relationship on the aspirations and experiences of Cuban athletes in the realm of professional baseball.

The historical context of political tensions between the United States and Cuba dates back to the late 19th century when Cuba sought independence from Spanish colonial rule. Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, Cuba gained supposed independence but became closely intertwined with American interests (Harris, 2016).

However, tensions soon arose as Cuba's nationalist aspirations clashed with America's economic and political influence in the region.



The relationship between the two nations became further strained with the rise of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution in 1959 (Figure 2), which resulted in the establishment of a communist government and the nationalization of American-owned businesses in Cuba. In response to Castro's government and its alignment with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the United States imposed a comprehensive economic embargo on Cuba in 1962 (Harris, 2016). The embargo strengthened over the years through various legislative measures such as the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, which aimed to isolate Cuba economically and politically, to pressure the Cuban government to adopt democratic reforms (Rodríguez, 2015).

The impact of the economic embargo on Cuba's sports industry, particularly baseball, has been profound. As Cuba's national sport and a source of immense pride and identity for its people, baseball has long served as a bridge between the two nations despite political tensions. However, the embargo has created significant barriers for Cuban athletes aspiring to play professionally in Major League Baseball. Restrictions on trade and financial transactions have limited access to essential resources such as sporting equipment, training facilities, and international competition opportunities for Cuban baseball players.

Moreover, the embargo has also contributed to the phenomenon of defection, where Cuban athletes risk their lives to escape their homeland and pursue careers in MLB. While defection offers the promise of lucrative contracts and a chance to compete at the highest level of professional baseball, it comes with immense personal and legal challenges, including navigating complex immigration processes, facing scrutiny from MLB teams and agents, and adjusting to life in a new country (Brewster, 2016, #27). Overall, the economic embargo between the United States and Cuba has cast a

long shadow over the aspirations and opportunities of Cuban athletes in the realm of professional baseball

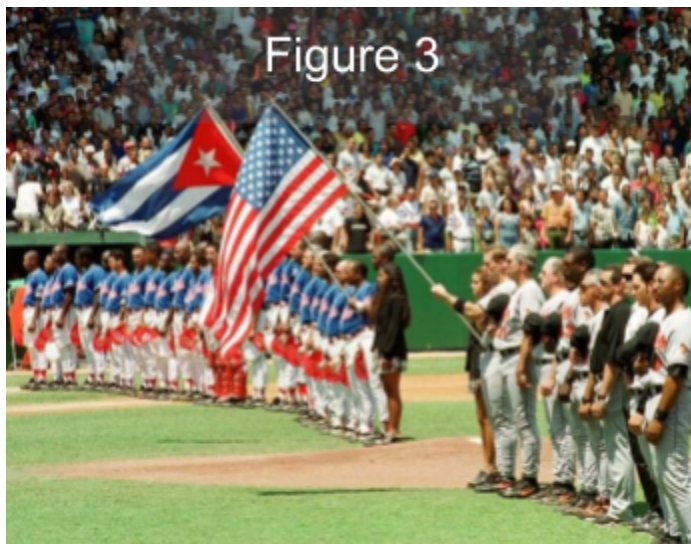
The historical context of the tensions between the US and Cuba sets the stage for understanding the challenges aspiring Cuban baseball players face. Political tensions and economic sanctions between the US and Cuba limit opportunities for Cuban athletes. These tensions have led to stringent travel restrictions, limiting the ability of Cuban players to showcase their talents on a global stage. Moreover, US economic sanctions, particularly the enduring embargo on Cuba, have severely restricted trade and financial transactions between the two nations. As a result, the Cuban sports industry, reliant on imports from the US for essential resources like sporting equipment, faces significant challenges in accessing such commodities (Kopecki, 2016).

Furthermore, the process of transitioning to MLB presents its own set of hurdles for Cuban athletes. Upon arriving in the US, players must navigate a new environment characterized by language barriers, unfamiliar social norms influenced by media portrayals, and cultural disparities. These factors can compound the challenges of adapting to life in a foreign country, impacting both their personal lives and on-field performance.

As Cuban athletes navigate the intricate web of challenges stemming from political tensions and economic sanctions between the US and Cuba, baseball continues to serve as a beacon of hope and resilience amidst adversity. Despite the barriers imposed by stringent travel restrictions and trade embargoes, the enduring passion for baseball in both nations has fostered moments of unity and collaboration. Indeed, the sport has played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of US-Cuba relations, transcending diplomatic disputes and fostering connections between people across borders.

The two nations have long shared admiration for the same players, cultivating a mutual respect that exceeds political disputes. As both countries continue to navigate the complexities of their relationship, baseball remains a symbol of hope and solidarity, reminding us of the power of sports to unite people and bridge divides.

Baseball has been instrumental in fostering connections and enhancing relations between the US and Cuba through various means. The easing of tensions through baseball has been seen in the form of player/cultural exchanges, international competitions, and diplomacy through baseball. In 1999, US President Bill Clinton eased travel restrictions to Cuba to increase cultural exchanges. This later resulted in the US selling food in Cuba for the first time and prompted consecutive presidents to visit. As part of the increase in cultural exchanges, the Baltimore Orioles played the Cuban National



team in two exhibition games. One in Baltimore (Figure 3) and the other in Havana in May of 1999. However, despite the symbolic nature of the games and the potential for diplomatic breakthroughs, the opportunity for significant diplomatic progress was missed as no US or Cuban

officials attended the games. Despite the absence of US or Cuban officials at the games, these exhibitions marked a pivotal moment in the cultural exchange between the two nations, showcasing the potential for sports diplomacy to transcend political barriers and foster mutual understanding (Minheere, J. (2021). In a journal entry called "Sporting diplomacy: Boosting the size of the

diplomatic corps,” Jeremy Goldberg writes, “the 1999 baseball games between the Orioles and Cuba, as it helped interject a new narrative into an environment traditionally controlled by Castro’s propaganda” (Goldberg, J. 2000). These exhibition games not only demonstrated the possibility of diplomacy through sports but also highlighted the countries’ shared passion for baseball that transcends borders. While the absence of official representatives may have been a missed opportunity for direct diplomatic progress, the cultural significance of the games resonated deeply with both Cuban and American audiences. As Jeremy Goldberg notes, events like these offer new narratives that challenge traditional political-diplomatic methods.

These first exhibition games paved the way for President Obama’s diplomatic visit to Cuba in March 2016. The United States government arranged a game between an MLB and Cuban National teams. Obama’s attendance at the game symbolized a tangible step towards normalizing relations between the two nations, marking the first visit by a sitting US president to Cuba in nearly 90 years



(Figure 4). Beyond the realm of sports, Obama implemented significant policy changes aimed at bridging the gap between the US and Cuba. In December 2014, he announced plans to restore diplomatic ties with Cuba, including the reopening of

embassies in both countries and easing travel and trade restrictions (William M. Leogrande, 2015).

These actions marked a significant change in the dynamic between the United States and Cuba, indicating a newfound openness to dialogue and diplomacy following years of strained relations

characterized by hostility and isolation. Through baseball, the US and Cuba continue to find common ground, paving the way for greater cooperation and reconciliation in the pursuit of shared goals.

Player exchanges between these two nations have also contributed to improving relations. When Cuban baseball players defect to play in the Major Leagues in the US, it enhances cultural exchange. It fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of Cuban athletes in the US. Players like José Abreu, Yasiel Puig, and Aroldis Chapman's success in the MLB not only elevates the profile of Cuban athletes but also helps break down stereotypes and misconceptions, promoting positive perceptions of Cuban culture and society among Americans. Additionally, the journey of these players from Cuba to the US highlights the shared passion for baseball that transcends political differences, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect between the two nations. Overall, player exchanges play a crucial role in bridging divides and building connections, contributing to the ongoing efforts to improve US-Cuban relations.



Yasiel Puig's (Figure 5) journey from Cuba to the Major Leagues is a remarkable tale of perseverance, talent, and the challenges inherent in defecting from a restrictive regime. Born on December 7, 1990, in Cienfuegos, Cuba, Puig exhibited extraordinary athletic prowess from an early age (Keown, 2014). His journey to the US is fraught with adversity, danger, and life-threatening experiences, including multiple failed defection attempts, navigating unfamiliar territory in a foreign country, and overcoming cultural and language barriers.

Puig's story is intertwined with the broader history of Cuban athletes defecting to pursue careers in Major League Baseball. The practice of defection gained prominence in the 1990s as Cuba grappled with economic hardships exacerbated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. With limited economic prospects and political constraints, many Cuban athletes saw defection as a pathway to greater opportunities and financial stability in the United States. One of the most significant defections in Cuban baseball history occurred in 1991 when René Arocha, a talented pitcher, fled the Cuban national team during a tournament in Miami. Arocha's successful defection paved the way for other Cuban players to follow suit, challenging the Cuban government's tight control over its athletes (Kopecki, 2016). Over the years, numerous Cuban baseball stars defected to pursue careers in the MLB, including Orlando "El Duque" Hernández, José Contreras, and Livan Hernández, among others. Each defection carried its risks and challenges, from navigating treacherous waters on makeshift rafts to evading Cuban security forces and risking imprisonment for treason.

Yasiel Puig embarked on his journey to illegally flee his home country in April of 2012. Puig, accompanied by his girlfriend, long-time friend and Cuban boxer Yunior Despaigne, and a priest, hiked for 30 hours, without sleep, to a remote beach where they waited for a boat to take them away. At just 21 years old, Yasiel Puig had already gained considerable recognition among Cuba's passionate baseball enthusiasts and officials of the country's security hierarchy (Eden et al., 2014).

Yunior Despaigne had become friends with a man in Miami by the name of Raul Pacheco, who knew of Puig's talent. Unknown to Despaigne was that the man he had befriended was not an experienced smuggler and was rather an air conditioning repairman looking to profit off of Puig's potential future earnings. Puig agreed to sign away 20% of his future earnings to Pacheco in exchange



for his help escaping Cuba. Pacheco organized and offered to pay for a group of smugglers in Mexico to help Puig and his friends (Robertson & GUERRERO, 2014). Puig's group of four took a speedboat 400 miles to Isla Mujeres Mexico, where they stayed in a hotel controlled by Los Zetas, a Mexican Drug Cartel. They were to stay in the hotel until the smugglers received payments from Pacheco. However, Pacheco did not have the money to finance these payments. They were held in the hotel as prisoners by the cartel for three weeks. Yunior Despaigne told CNN in an interview, "If they didn't receive the money, they were saying that at any moment they might give him a *machetazo* (a whack from a machete), chop off an arm, a finger, whatever, and he would never play baseball again, not for anyone" (*Entrevista Con Yunior Despaigne*, 2014). Knowing the smugglers would never be paid off, Yasiel and his group were forced to escape the hotel. They were aided by another resident of the hotel who had connections with the Mexican police. They successfully left the hotel without conflict and through a series of bribes were able to board flights without identification from Cancún to Mexico City. Upon arrival, Mexican Police guarded Puig and his friends at all times to protect them from the smugglers, thanks to the man who helped them escape the hotel. Within just days of arriving in Mexico City, Yasiel Puig began doing workouts for Major League teams (Katz, 2014). On June 28th, 2012 Yasiel signed a seven-year, \$42 million contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers before he could even open a United States Bank account. Though he was free and had finally achieved his dream of playing in the MLB, Puig still had a target on his back from the smugglers who never received their money. Puig remained at risk from the smugglers for years to come, which forced the dodgers to pay for extra security for his protection. Puig's journey to the US meant leaving his family behind in Cuba, and the ongoing tensions between the two nations made it difficult for him to visit or communicate with them

regularly, introducing an additional layer of complexity to his already turbulent path toward a career in professional baseball. In a mini-documentary Yasiel made about his journey from Cuba, he says, “I miss it there, I miss a lot of people there” (*Yasiel Puig | Life in Cuba*, 2017).

Yasiel Puig's journey from Cuba to the United States sheds light on the challenges faced by Cuban baseball players seeking to play in the MLB. The dangers of defection, including exploitation by smugglers and threats from criminal organizations, highlight the situation many athletes find themselves in when attempting to pursue their dreams abroad. The fear of repercussions from both the Cuban government and criminal elements can deter talented players from seeking opportunities in the US, limiting their ability to showcase their skills on the international stage and potentially depriving baseball fans of witnessing their talent.

The plethora of obstacles Cubans face in their journeys to the United States, deter many scouts from focusing their talent search solely on the island nation. Cuba's rich baseball heritage and abundance of skilled players are overshadowed by the formidable barriers of stringent travel restrictions, political tensions, and economic hardships. Experiences like Puig's not only deter players from embarking on similar journeys but also possibly cause MLB scouts to often divert their attention to other Latin American countries like the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico. In these countries, the process of recruiting and signing players is comparatively simpler and less encumbered by the complexities and risks inherent in Cuban defections. Despite Cuba's undeniable talent pool, the practical difficulties and legal challenges of bringing Cuban players to the United States compel MLB teams to explore alternative avenues for talent acquisition. Consequently, while Cuba remains a

ground for baseball talent, the practicalities of accessing that talent push scouts toward regions where the pathway to professional baseball is more navigable.

In conclusion, the journey of Cuban athletes aspiring to play in Major League Baseball (MLB) is one defined by resilience, talent, and the enduring impact of political tensions. From the sun-drenched diamonds of Havana to the iconic stadiums of MLB, Cuban athletes navigate a complex intersection of geopolitics, economics, and sports while pursuing their dreams professionally. Despite Cuba's rich baseball tradition and abundance of talent, stringent travel restrictions, political strife, and economic hardships create significant barriers for athletes seeking opportunities in the United States. The impact of the enduring economic embargo between the United States and Cuba looms large, casting a shadow over the aspirations and opportunities of Cuban athletes in the realm of professional baseball. However, amidst these challenges, baseball continues to serve as a beacon of hope and resilience, fostering moments of unity and collaboration between the two nations. While the journey for Cuban athletes is filled with obstacles, their stories of perseverance, like that of Yasiel Puig, shed light on the immense challenges they face and the profound sacrifices they make in pursuit of their dreams. Despite the hurdles, the shared passion for baseball transcends borders, reminding us of the power of sports to unite people, bridge divides, and foster mutual understanding between nations. As Cuba and the United States navigate their complex relationship, baseball remains a symbol of hope and solidarity, offering glimpses of potential cooperation on and off the field.

Potential barriers to research on the topic of Cuban athletes aspiring to play in Major League Baseball (MLB) include limited access to primary sources, particularly from within Cuba, due to government restrictions on information and communication. Additionally, conducting interviews

with Cuban athletes or officials may be challenging due to language barriers, cultural differences, and concerns about political sensitivities. Future research opportunities could explore the long-term impact of recent political developments, such as Clinton and Obama's diplomacy efforts, on the aspirations and experiences of Cuban baseball players. Additionally, comparative studies with athletes from other Latin American countries could provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of talent acquisition in MLB.

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