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Fidel Castro and Baseball: The Untold Story
by
Peter C. Bjarkman
Few political figures of the modern age have been so vilified as Fidel Castro, and both the vilification and worship generated by the Cuban leader have combined to distort the true image of Castro. The baseball myths attached to Fidel have loomed every bit as large as the skewed political notions that surround him. Castro was never a major league pitching prospect, nor did he destroy the Cuban national pastime in 1962. In Fidel Castro and Baseball: The Untold Story, Peter C. Bjarkman dispels numerous myths about the Cuban leader and his association with baseball. In this groundbreaking study, Bjarkman establishes how Fidel constructed, rather than dismantled, Cuba’s true baseball Golden Age—one that followed rather than preceded the 1959 revolution. Bjarkman also demonstrates that Fidel was not at all unique in “ politicizing” baseball as often maintained, since the island sport traces its roots to the 19th-century revolution. Fidel’s avowed devotion to a non-materialist society would ultimately sow the seeds of collapse for the baseball empire he built over more than a half-century, just as the same obsession would finally dismantle the larger social revolution he had painstakingly authored. A fascinating look at a controversial figure and his impact on a major sport, this volume reveals many intriguing insights about Castro and how his love of the game was tied to Cuba’s identity. Fidel Castro and Baseball will appeal to fans of the sport as well as to those interested in Cuba’s enduring association with baseball.

Synopsis

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Look inside the book

Praise for Fidel Castro and Baseball“Peter Bjarkman is by far the number one American authority on Cuban baseball and the Cuban government's role in it. When I want to know something about Cuban baseball, he is the first, and only person, I call. As in all his previous works about Cuban baseball, Bjarkman dispels long-held myths. Whether or not you agree with his take on Castro's role in the development of Cuban baseball, you will find this a fascinating read."—Eric Nadel, Texas Rangers radio announcer, 2014 Winner Ford C. Frick Award, National Baseball Hall of Fame“Peter Bjarkman deserves the largest hurrah for his exceptional research, analysis, and captivating writing style in detaching myth from reality, debunking long-established political and sporting biases, and ultimately detailing the extraordinary story of Fidel Castro and Baseball. It would have been easy to accept past reporting follies, or to reduce diplomatic matters to good and bad guys, and even turn a complex individual like Castro into a cartoon character. Fortunately he avoids this trap by choosing the much harder route of examining motives and 'paths not taken' with a critical but often sympathetic eye. We the reader are the wiser and better served by a book in which the conflicted nature of major league baseball's interests and those of the Cuban baseball establishment operate within the larger arena of history's judgment."—William Humber, baseball historian, 2018 inductee into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame“Peter Bjarkman’s Fidel Castro and Baseball navigates the complex dynamics of Castro, baseball, and Cuban-American relations with authority and attitude. The author provides context, flavor, and history—and debunks myths—with fervor and passion."—Todd Radom, author and graphic designer for professional sports teams and events"Misconceptions, often willful, abound about Cuba. With the recent opening to that nation, now's the time to set the record straight. Given baseball's central place in its culture, the sport provides a revealing window into the real Cuba. To understand baseball's role in post-revolutionary Cuba, few people are as qualified as Peter Bjarkman to capture the story, given his long years immersed in the sport on the island nation. In this book, he exposes the myths and illuminates the realities behind Fidel Castro's own baseball prospects, his revolutionary uses for the sport, and Cuban baseball's professional-to-amateur transition. Bjarkman provides the first, detailed account of baseball in Cuba after the revolution (and in its current status today) while also demystifying Castro and his revolutionary objectives. This is a well-written, compelling story, filled with surprising anecdotes. Highly recommended."—Robert Elias, author of The Empire Strikes Out and Baseball and the American Dream“For nearly three decades Peter C. Bjarkman has been the preeminent English-language interpreter of the magic and mystery of Cuban baseball. Reaching beyond the romance and the rhythms of the island, he has been our guide to the passion, pride, and religious devotion to a different kind of game, one long hidden from U.S. fans just 90 miles off their own shores. In his latest effort, perhaps his most important to date, Bjarkman blends that unique knowledge in an uncompromising work that refutes some of the most durable myths about the Cuban game and its chief benefactor, Fidel Castro."— Kevin Baxter, sports writer, Los Angeles Times“Like an ace hurler on the mound, Bjarkman certainly has ‘great stuff!’ He fires off and deliverers a masterful, precise, and thoroughly-researched chronology of the real story of Fidel Castro’s Cuba and baseball. Dispelling decades-old misinformation, Bjarkman enlightens readers to the truth. This one bats 1.000!”—Byron Motley, author and photographer of Embracing Cuba“With Fidel Castro and Baseball, Peter C. Bjarkman drives the readers to one of the most complex personalities of the 20th century. Peter, once again controversial, breaks traditional barriers to bring down many myths about Fidel Castro’s relationship with baseball. All readers, whatever
their political views, will find much to stimulate their thinking in this book.”—Ray Otero, director of BaseballdeCuba.com

“Peter Bjarkman’s meticulously-researched volume thoroughly illuminates a blind spot long shared by Fidel Castro’s many biographers and Cuba historians: the crucial role that baseball has played in the Cuban Revolution. In the process, Fidel Castro and Baseball establishes how baseball itself came to be an indispensable cog in a sports machine inextricably intertwined with the Revolution’s political ideals—one that shared the latter’s failings and miscalculations. But the book’s most important contribution is its demystification of Fidel’s own relationship to the island nation’s beloved game, and the debunking, once and for all, of the persistent myth of Fidel as would-have-been MLB pitcher. Required reading for anyone who cares about either Cuba or baseball, or both.”—Alfred J. López, author of José Martí: A Revolutionary Life

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Peter C. Bjarkman

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To Ismael Sené Alegret

“If there is any objection to be made about the truthfulness of this history, it can only be that its author was an [American], and it is a well-known feature of [Americans] that they are all liars; but since they are such enemies of ours, it’s to be supposed that he fell short of the truth rather than exaggerating it.”—adapted from Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Don Quixote

Acknowledgments

The author of a book always gets to say the last word. This is probably unfair to Castro (but fortunate for me), since his disputatious mind would surely find some plausible reply for each criticism I offer.—Lee Lockwood, Castro’s Cuba, Cuba’s Castro[1]

This book is a product (and in many ways a culmination) of more than 20 years and almost 50 trips to the Communist nation of Cuba. Like my recent volume on the Cuban baseball defectors phenomenon, Cuba’s Baseball Defectors: The Inside Story (2016), it is an attempt to explain the past half-century of Cuba’s remarkable baseball history. It is also a major amplification and, in numerous places, a much-needed correction of articles and chapters I have earlier published in print or online detailing Fidel Castro’s unique relationship with the national sport of his island nation. It is my effort at having the last word, while at the same time being fully aware (as was Lee Lockwood) that the “last word in a book is not necessarily the last word on the subject.” Truth in advertising requires a revelation here that unlike many frequent travelers to the island, I never met Fidel Castro personally or even came face-to-face with the Cuban leader—
only once glimpsed him in the flesh from afar during the massive December 6, 1999, Elian González protest march along the seafront Malecón. I share this distinction of never meeting the Cuban leader with his most important English-language biographer, Robert Quirk. Nonetheless, I did enjoy contact with some family members (especially Antonio Castro) and the major baseball figures from the final decades of Fidel’s presence. Those baseball connections were often tenuous—quite intimate with those on the lower rungs of the political and social ladder (i.e., ballplayers, journalists, radio and television commentators, stadium security personnel, and, most importantly, fans) but sometimes rather strained with higher-ranking personnel (provincial and national INDER sports ministry officials, national team security staff, and a pair of long-serving presidents of the Cuban Baseball Federation, Cuba’s equivalent of the baseball commissioner). Carlitos Rodríguez (1997–2007) was always warm and cordial, and demonstrated his faith that I was an important friend of Cuban baseball. Higinio Vélez (2006–2017), by contrast, always seemed resentful and suspicious of my presence as an American (i.e., enemy) outsider whose motives could never be above serious suspicion. Given how many times Cuban baseball officials were burned in the end by their good-faith trust in American journalists, I always understood and even sympathized with the doubt under which I most often fell. I have often been asked if I had met Fidel, and the fact that I did not of course remains my single greatest regret—perhaps the only one—of two decades on the ground in Cuba. But I always respond to that inquiry by replying that although I never saw the comandante up close and personal, I was nonetheless certain he had seen me, thanks to two early and groundbreaking appearances of mine on Cuban national television in 2001 and 2003. On those occasions—a pair of interviews with veteran Havana sportscaster Carlos Hernández Luján aired on Cubavision Internacional—I was the first American allowed to extensively voice personal assessments of the Cuban pastime, its national team successes, and the qualities of domestic league play. Known for his obsessive micromanaging, Fidel had to be watching. * * * My Cuban sojourn and efforts at unraveling Cuban baseball for a North American audience has been a journey with many accomplices and ardent supporters along the way. Everyone cannot be mentioned here, but a full baker’s dozen need to be singled out for my special indebtedness. Ronnie Bring Wilbur, my life’s partner, has remained from first to last my greatest supporter, cheerleader, and sharp-eyed critic. She has tolerated endless trips and infinite hours at my office computer with good cheer and the faith that I was doing something truly important. A world-ranking scholar in her own right, she remains my hero and biggest inspiration. Ismael Sené was my first baseball contact in Cuba and has, for two decades, remained my greatest champion on the island. The countless hours spent watching and debating the Cuban game with Havana’s leading expert have been indispensable to whatever knowledge and insights I have stumbled on throughout the years. Ray Otero, the dynamo behind Cuban baseball’s most important online presence, gave me a forum for much of my work during the past full decade. Ray has tirelessly built and maintained the leading Cuban baseball website (BaseballDeCuba.com) with no reward in mind aside from providing others with access long hidden from American fans. One of my proudest accomplishments has been assisting him in that effort. Mark Rucker originally opened the door to Cuba with his inspired idea of traveling there in 1996, as part of a groundbreaking research venture resulting in the much-praised book Smoke: The Romance and Lore of Cuban Baseball. It was that book that launched my own obsessions with Cuba. Ernest “Kit” Krieger (“El Jefe”) has played his own vital role in promoting Cuban baseball for North American audiences via his “Cubaball” tours—annual visits taking hundreds of Canadian and American aficionados to the island since 2001, for the purpose of viewing Cuban baseball and Cuban ballparks firsthand. Kit has played a
major role in reshaping the image of Yanquis within Cuba itself, and also in tearing down the thick veil of misunderstandings surrounding this safest, most beautiful, and friendliest among Caribbean nations. Clem Axel Paredes, Kit’s “Cubaball” partner in recent years, has proven to be not only a valued companion in travels around the island on a half-dozen journeys but also has shared a vital role in Krieger’s mission of building bridges between two baseball-loving nations. Antonio “Tony” Castro (Fidel’s son, long-time Cuban national baseball team doctor, and an important figure in international baseball administration) has been generous with his time, his displays of friendship, and his support for an inquisitive Yanqui outsider who might easily have raised serious suspicions with such a frequent presence in Cuba and around the Cuban national team on road trips in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Martin Hachtown was another valued companion and outstanding journalist who provided support and opened doors during the first decade of my Cuban travels. Unfortunately, Martin spent much of the last decade on duty with Prensa Latina in Vietnam, India, Syria, and Argentina, and he was definitely missed during recent visits to Havana. Eddie Artiles proved for more than a decade to be an invaluable guide, an important early contact with ballplayers in Havana, and above all a trusted and irreplaceable friend. Eddie was my dependable driver on numerous visits to Pinar, Sancti Spiritus, and Santa Clara, and always kept me well supplied with the best of Cuban street food en route to dozens of ballparks throughout the Cuban countryside. Carlitos Rodriguez, Cuban League commissioner from 1997 to 2007, showed unusual trust in a North American interloper. It was Carlitos who first grasped and championed my mission in Cuba and opened an important early door with other Cuban baseball authorities. Robert Weinstein facilitated my legal Cuba travel between 2001 and his unfortunate death in 2009, and for nine years shared the Cuban adventure on the ground in Havana. Bob’s interests as a former minor-league ballclub owner were focused on possible future business and investment opportunities in an evolving Cuban economy, but he was also never far from the baseball scene. Numerous Cuban ballplayers—especially slugger Freddie Cepeda, manager Victor Mesa, pitcher Yosvany Aragón (later special assistant to the baseball commissioner), pitcher Freddie Asiel Alvarez, and the late pitcher Yadier Pedroso—provided hospitality, unique insiders’ views, and, most importantly, genuine friendship. Cepeda opened his home on the island and also opened the “amistad” of so many teammates. The charismatic Victor Mesa, Cuba’s most colorful and controversial manager of the past decade, championed my repeated presence as a “friend of Cuban baseball,” and his support richly enhanced my status on the island. Christen Karniski, my editor for this book as well as my earlier Rowman & Littlefield tome on the Cuban baseball defectors phenomenon, demonstrated the support for and faith in my work, which has led to my two most important publications. Finally, a tip of the baseball cap to numerous correspondents, readers, and faceless Facebook “friends” in the South Florida Cuban exile community—some known and others not—most of whom will likely hate this book when they see its cover, but some of whom, at least, might learn something new if they venture to turn its pages. 1. Lee Lockwood, Castro’s Cuba, Cuba’s Fidel: An American Journalist’s Inside Look at Today’s Cuba—in Text and Pictures (New York: Random House [Vintage Books], 1969), 325.
volume to the game’s evolution after Fidel’s surprising rise to power and subsequent adoption of a socialist-inspired and amateur-oriented baseball model. González Echevarría’s treatment of the island nation’s favored sport unaccountably gives rather short shrift to the weightiest and most intriguing chapter of Cuba’s baseball story—those recent decades during which the island sport emerged from a diminished role as satellite to North America’s professional game and arrived at the forefront of late-twentieth-century world amateur competitions. And yet the Yale literature professor does strike a true chord when he points to an unparalleled connection between Latin America’s most important socialist revolutionary leader and the island’s remarkable passion for the sport of bats and balls.[2]

González Echevarría—a Cuban American exile whose displaced family suffered the pain of a Cuban diaspora resulting from Castro’s revolutionary transformation of their homeland—rather reluctantly observes that no parallels might be found for Fidel’s unique intercourse with baseball. The author of The Pride of Havana is forced to concede that only rather ludicrous hypothetical comparisons might be imagined for such a phenomenon. One such fantastic stretch of the mind would be to envision Francisco Franco deeply committed to the fortunes of Spanish bullfighting and thus frequently donning the “traje de luces” for occasional ceremonial appearances. Just as easily dismissed are other possible lame comparisons, for instance, Juan Perón taking legitimate interest in Argentinian soccer, Pérez Jimenez dedicated to the fate of Venezuelan Olympic teams, or Anastasio Somoza controlling the reins of the Nicaraguan national baseball team. For one thing, none of those comparable political strongmen lasted as long as Castro; for another, “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 institution like Organized Baseball.”[3]

FASTBALL OR CURVEBALL. Fidel heaves a ceremonial first pitch to open an early 1960s youth amateur world championship tournament in Havana. From the author’s collectionIn essence, the lapse might be easy enough to explain if not to dismiss. González Echevarría also rather astutely notes that “so many controversies have surrounded the Cuban Revolution that few have taken notice or given serious thought to this phenomenon.”[4] Despite acknowledging that such oversight of Fidel’s central role in shaping modern-era Cuban baseball is certainly no trivial matter, the Cervantes scholar—here turned baseball historian devoted to the notion that Cuban baseball largely died after 1960—unfortunately gives the subject only the briefest of inspections in his own landmark book. One of Cuban baseball’s most significant stories—indeed perhaps its most significant “untold” story—therefore continues to search for a long-overdue serious treatment. Fidel’s unparalleled baseball activities are indeed a legitimate subject that has almost entirely escaped the iconic Cuban leader’s multitude of serious scholarly biographers and numerous popular press portrayers. Unfortunately, however, Fidel’s misconstrued baseball connection has occasionally turned up as an entertaining reference point for North American sportscasters and even lent itself to the imaginations of novelists and spinners of fictional accounts involving the late twentieth century’s most illustrious communist dictator. It most often takes shape as the surprising image of a young fastball-hurling future rebel leader and U.S. Cold War nemesis tantalizing big-league scouts with his high, hard ones and yet somehow escaping a professional career on the diamond that might have cancelled out his future role as prickly thorn in the side of Washington politicians. The enticing legend of “Fidel Castro, Hot Big-League Prospect” often turns up in surprising places. One of the more concise and insightful historical overviews of American efforts to first forestall the populist rebellion against Fulgencio Batista and later unseat Castro once he took power is somehow diminished in scholarly credibility when its author, Thomas Paterson, falls prey to repeating the irresistible Fidel ball-
playing saga. To quote Paterson directly: Fidel Castro himself had earned some baseball notoriety by the late 1940s. North American major-league scouts noticed his considerable pitching talents for the University of Havana baseball team. Known for “a wicked bleeping curveball,” Castro seemed a good prospect for professional baseball in the United States. “He could set ‘em up with the curve, blow ‘em down with the heater,” recalled a scout for the Pittsburgh Pirates. But because his fastball was not overpowering, Castro became known as a “smart” player who kept batters guessing. In a November 1948 game against a team of touring major leaguers, Castro struck out the All-Star Hank Greenberg and gave up only three hits and no runs.[5] The misconceptions and distortions here are legion. Presumably a careful scholar on U.S.–Cuban relations, Paterson certainly didn’t apply the same rigor when it came to what he must have seen as less weighty topics like baseball. He here cites the infamous article by J. David Truby published in both Sports History II (March 1989) and later Harper’s Magazine as the source for his Howie Haak quote (the scout for the Pittsburgh Pirates he refers to). The absurdities of Truby’s article are taken up in chapter 2 of this book. But there is also reason to doubt Paterson’s text on other counts. Castro biographer Robert Quirk, reviewing the book in the Journal of American History, dismisses Paterson’s work as a failure to access admittedly scarce Spanish-language sources and also condemns the lack of wider knowledge of Cuban events, forcing the author to weaken his assessments of Fidel’s motives, intentions, and thoughts with such qualifiers as “perhaps,” “probably,” or “must have.” He also faults Paterson for buying into the myth of Fidel as a great athlete and, in particular, underscores the error regarding pitching to Hank Greenberg.[6] At the supposed time of the incident (November 1948), Fidel was actually honeymooning with his new bride in New York. There is also no record of any such barnstorming visit to Cuba by Greenberg that winter or fall. The one such team including big-leaguers to visit the island that offseason was a group of mostly Negro National League stars organized by Alex Pompez, and current and future big-leaguers included on that tour were black stars Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Monte Irvin, George Crowe, and Pat Scantlebury. To boot, Greenberg’s final season as a big-leaguer was 1947. Paterson’s highly unreliable sources for such dubious reporting thus appear to be the same small handful frequently cited by others prone to shoddy fact-checking of the kind that might be surprising enough from novice baseball scribes but far less acceptable in the work of serious political historians. Ironically, Paterson is one of the few Fidel specialists to report on any baseball connections whatsoever, but he bungles the job by relying on spurious accounts so easily dismantled by actual fact (as demonstrated in chapter 2). One is the historically unfounded popular Sports magazine tale penned by former big-leaguer Don Hoak. The second is a short Harper’s piece offered by an apparently gullible interviewer of then-septuagenarian Pirates scout Howie Haak who had whipped up a fantastic tale as mind-bending as the one dreamed up by Hoak. * * * It is perhaps needless to stress that Cuba’s indomitable leader for more than six Cold War decades is one of the most important and controversial political and historical figures of the modern era. Such claims seem redundant after such a mountainous literature debating the legacy of the controversial Cuban revolutionary leader. As a rare Fidel champion in the North American press, Herbert Matthews correctly contends as early as the first decade of Castro’s remarkably long reign—one whose grip has not yet been loosened in his native land more than a decade after declining health and eventual death transferred leadership to younger brother Raúl—that the Cuban leader was without doubt the most important single figure of Latin American political history.[7] Even less-than-sympathetic biographer Georgie Anne Geyer would much later note (writing two full decades after Matthews) that on the 30th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution’s initial triumph, Fidel still remained the most prominent
romantic revolutionary hero of the twentieth century.” [8] Matthews also struck a resounding chord in arguing in the immediate aftermath of Fidel’s miraculous rise to power, that the Cuban leader’s personal aura and makeup was indeed so complicated and shrouded in self-created mystery that no one could adequately capture the entire Fidel, and such a cogent observation has proven true in a subsequent half-century of scholarly attention to the Cuban Revolution and its extraordinary leader. Opinions on Fidel are, to a large degree, biased, as Matthews so long ago stressed. They depend entirely on the orientation of the viewer. [9] As the first Latin American figure in any field to achieve worldwide fame during his lifetime, he remains one of the most worshipped yet vilified figures of his century. There is no middle ground on Fidel, just as there is no middle ground on the highly disruptive social revolution he brought to his island nation. For many, especially in Latin America and throughout long-exploited Third World nations, Fidel Castro is an unmatched hero. Such also remains true in Cuba itself, even if the luster and enthusiasm of the promised revolutionary dream has faded in the aftermath of collapsing Soviet economic aid, decades of public and personal sacrifice, and the eventual social and economic attrition caused, in large part, by a half-century-long U.S. economic embargo. Still, for millions of Cubans who stayed at home after the revolutionary upheaval there was much to be thankful for. Fidel overthrew the most vicious dictatorship in the history of a country that had largely known nothing but oppressive and corrupt regimes. He and his July 26th Movement brought substantial lifestyle upgrades for lower-class Cuban peasants and laborers who previously had little or nothing to enrich their desperate existence. And perhaps most important of all to so many Cubans long suffering from a lengthy history of abuse at the hands of Spanish and North American colonial overlords, Fidel, almost overnight, made his small island nation a significant and highly unexpected “player” on a U.S.–Soviet-dominated Cold War stage. Throughout the years, Fidel would not only emerge as an ingenious tactician and dedicated author of change in his homeland, but also prove remarkably durable to forces aimed at his eradication. He would survive numerous direct assassination attempts at the hands of U.S. operatives.[10] He would escape plans for a North American invasion (some only recently revealed with the 2017 release of long-sealed Kennedy administration documents). He would repel a direct invasion at the Bay of Pigs that cemented support at home and represented one of the largest blunders of U.S. foreign policy during the modern era. He would survive direct conflicts with his adopted Soviet masters and, while depending on the Russians for economic survival, never relinquish to them or the international Communist Party any control of his steadfastly Cuban-flavored nationalistic revolutionary movement. He would survive the collapse of the Soviet bloc and much of the Cold War Communist bloc, and also the Special Period of economic deprivation Soviet collapse imparted on Cuban society. He would only be felled eventually by the unavoidable forces of aging and the associated onset of physical incapacity during his ninth decade. Even then, he would successfully pass the torch to his brother and the political machinery he left behind, and his somewhat debilitated but still-standing revolutionary government would continue to limp on after his death. The newly entrenched Cuban leader also repeatedly escaped numerous attempts to oust him from control via counterrevolutionary activities on the home front. Counterrevolutionary groups operated in the Cuban countryside in the months immediately following Batista’s ouster, and acts of sabotage created tension in the capital city; such sporadic outbreaks (mostly isolated, minor explosions) would provide convenient excuse for North American professional baseball to cease its minor-league and winter-league operations on the island in 1960 (see chapter 4). While the most severe early threat to the new regime was the Washington-backed Bay of Pigs invasion attempt of April 1961, that CIA-sponsored plan was based, in large part, on a
miscalculation that counterrevolutionary forces were indeed strong and could be relied upon to rally behind the exile invasion forces. Biographer Peter Bourne also reports on CIA efforts to recruit Mafia aid in “eliminating” the new and unsavory Cuban leader with increasing troublesome communist leanings.[11] But always Fidel survived and always only seemed to grow stronger in the aftermath. For avowed opponents, ideological detractors, the bulk of American politicians devoted to anti-communism and American exceptionalism, and, above all, Cuban exile communities centered mostly in South Florida, Fidel steadfastly remained throughout the decades the ultimate personification of pure evil and the central tragic manifestation of unwavering, lifelong hatred. American policy on Cuba has continued to echo a single theme—no change in U.S.–Cuba relations can occur until the island is completely free of any leaders carrying the name Castro.[12] As I earlier stated the case in Cuba’s Baseball Defectors, for Americans whose politics tip heavily to the right, “Castro’s indefatigable if tarnished empire is the last vestige of a much-despised and brutal communist regime, long fantasized to be a serious threat to American-style democracy.”[13] Even in the wake of Fidel’s death and a new American administration, this obsession has hardly abated, especially in view of recent unsubstantiated Washington charges of supposed Cuban government “sonic attacks” on U.S. Embassy personnel in Havana and a stark reversal by the Trump administration of Obama’s efforts at opening a new era of American–Cuban cooperation. Of course, all revolutions create considerable upheaval, as eloquently observed by Herbert Matthews, and the Cuban Revolution destroyed the nation’s middle class, caused thousands to lose either their lives or their personal freedoms in opposition to the new regime, and millions more to be cast into resentful exile on foreign shores.[14] Castro’s revolution brought with it one of the great diasporas of the past century. For the U.S. government, which for the most part was motivated at the time of Fidel’s rebellion against Batista by an overriding desperation to protect North American business interests and an obsessive paranoia about the spread of world communism, Castro and his rebellion became and has since remained a lasting Cold War–era obsession. That obsession quickly peaked with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and, for the half-century that followed, lived on as an anachronistic and clearly failed effort to unseat the Cuban strongman. It would provide a misguided U.S. foreign policy that did nothing to foster political change or return Cuba to its prerevolutionary state. It only underscored Matthews’s early 1960s observation that “Castro or no Castro,” the Cuban Revolution of 1959 was an event that could never be successfully reversed. * * * Fidel’s baseball coin has been tarnished on both sides and was from the outset. If the ball-playing prospect was pure mythology, the image of Cuban baseball destroyer was very much the same kind of ruthless fabrication. The former notion quickly evolved into a half-serious joke, ideal for bringing the archenemy down to human size, while poking fun at both the self-important dictator and those bosses of capitalism who repeatedly bungled efforts to neutralize him. The second took on its own life as a favored crutch for bitter enemies in the South Florida exile community, gripped tightly alongside the other indispensable twin mantras—that Fidel Castro had betrayed the original revolution he promised and that he had been an avowed Marxist from the start. The first side of the coin distorts Fidel’s true underlying interests in his country’s national pastime, while the second ignores his immense contribution to Cuba’s important baseball saga. Fidel’s full-scale impact on baseball in his homeland is, in fact, just as undeniable, but also just as controversial as his more celebrated role on a larger stage of domestic and international politics. The loss of professional baseball on the island during the summer of 1960 (relocation of the minor-league Havana Sugar Kings franchise) and also at the end of the subsequent winter-league season (closing of the four-team Havana circuit after 73 seasons) brought unanticipated opportunities
for revamping the national sport within the envisioned framework of a new revolutionary society. Fidel himself would be the clear architect of that rather immense evolution of Cuba's sporting culture. The events attached to the transition of the Cuban national pastime are yet another example of how Fidel's revolution was always clearly a work in progress, an ever-evolving flux, more the result of unexpected necessity than any long-range planning. Each step in drastically overhauling Cuban society after January 1959 ultimately resulted from unplanned and unanticipated opportunities suddenly arising in the aftermath of circumstances most often attributable to a surrounding political landscape. Baseball was hardly an exception. The surviving and cherished view, of course, is that Fidel destroyed baseball in Cuba in the wake of his 1959 revolution. That was a popular theme struck once again in the North American press at the time of Castro's long-anticipated but long-delayed death in late November 2016. The familiar theme was echoed by César Brioso in a USA Today response to Fidel's ultimate demise.[15] This persistent stance was earlier heavily promoted by Roberto González Echevarría (The Pride of Havana) and Milton Jamail (Full Count) in their treatments of Cuban baseball in the final year of the twentieth century, with Fidel still in power. But Fidel's role was, at best, only an indirect one, and at least regarding the minor-league Sugar Kings franchise, there is every piece of evidence that he actively worked to keep the beleaguered ballclub on Cuban soil. An aversion to professional sport and an outspoken distaste for contact with the American big leagues would emerge more as a forced response than any originally held motive (see chapter 4). Events surrounding his revolution and resulting immediate harsh opposition from Washington provided an environment that appeared to threaten vested interests of Organized Baseball, just as they threatened all American business operations in Cuba. But, surprisingly, baseball was one “business connection” Fidel seemed bent on maintaining, at least until his hand was finally forced. In the end, it was the International League and Major League Baseball that closed down existing Cuban connections by the summer of 1960 and early winter of 1961. A new Fidel-inspired version of Cuban national baseball was much more an unavoidable result than any premeditated cause of the disappearance of an American-sponsored professional game. Those who take the view that Castro alone killed baseball in Havana are those who also see baseball as little more than a professional brand linked to the MLB model. No matter where responsibility lies for the demise of the Sugar Kings, or the idle dream of a possible Havana big-league franchise looming on the horizon, the unavoidable truth is that baseball as a viable enterprise did not end under Fidel's tightened grip in the early 1960s, nor did it disappear from the scene once the American-sponsored version closed up shop. It only changed its stripes or redefined its missions, becoming more a popular social institution than a profit-generating business. If anything, it expanded, strengthened, and became more closely linked to Cuban nationalism and Cuban pride than ever before. The INDER-sponsored National Series, launched in 1962, quickly expanded (from an original four clubs to a dozen by the end of the first decade and 17 by the end of the second) to spread high-level competition throughout the island. Top-notch baseball spectacles were no longer restricted to four clubs entertaining admission-paying fans in Havana and employing as many or more foreign imports than native Cuban stars. The new league was by every measure Cuban-flavored, a reflection of the country's long-overdue, jealous control of its own resources. If the players were labelled “amateur” and played for patriotic ideals more than lucrative salaries, they were still, of course, professionals in other senses—their professionalism measured by their full-time dedication to their craft and not the size of their paychecks. American naysayers would, in fact, repeatedly complain throughout the next several decades that the Cubans were using pros and not amateurs on their national
squads, oftentimes embarrassing American teams in top-level international competitions (see chapters 6 and 9). Cuban national squads under the new regime became stronger than ever, and Cuba’s image as an international power on the world stage would soon outstrip an already hefty reputation earned on international diamonds in earlier years (Cuba having dominated the first half-dozen Amateur World Series tournaments of the World War II era). By the time once strictly amateur international tournament baseball adopted wooden bats and welcomed pros from all nations (both events occurring in 1999), Cuban players were better than ever, and if there were more intense competitions and thus reduced dominance for the Cubans, nonetheless the powerhouse Fidel had built and sustained with his often-hands-on support was just peaking with its true golden age. Massive island television audiences for a first MLB-sponsored World Baseball Classic in 2006, and the wild celebrations throughout the country when the Cubans reached the showdown finals versus the Japanese pro-league all-stars in San Diego, far outstripped any baseball-related event in the island nation’s history. These developments would hardly suggest baseball was moribund in Cuba. Fidel had done anything but kill the national sport. He had only taken it out of the hands of American corporate ownership. That contemporary Cuban players (those who are true products of baseball on the island) are superior to those of any earlier generations has been fully demonstrated in the wake of massive player defections during the past decade. Recent island-trained Cuban big-leaguers like José Abreu, Aroldis Chapman, Yoenis Céspedes, Yulieski Gurriel, Yasiel Puig, Orlando and Liván Hernández, and a handful more have far outstripped the achievements and impact of such early and mid-twentieth century Cuban second-level stars as Miñoso, Pascual, Ramos, Versailles, or even Adolfo Luque. Later twentieth-century Cubans the likes of Tany Pérez, Miguel Cuéllar, Tony Oliva, José Canseco, or Rafael Palmeiro cannot be considered part of the equation here since although born on the island, they are products of training in the North American system and not escapees from the Cuban baseball culture. An additional criticism of Fidel’s baseball obsession cites its use for promoting advantages of Cuba’s revamped Marxist society. This was the accusation that Fidel had “politicized the sport” with the creation of INDER in 1962, and his forced linkage of the game to his revolution and its radical goals. But this again is a frivolous charge on at least two counts. Baseball had been directly connected to displays of Cuban nationalism decades before the arrival of Fidel Castro. Baseball jingoism was never more blatantly on display than it was with the adamant focus on Cuban team victories over American barnstormers during the first decade of the twentieth century. Wins in the so-called “American Seasons” of those early years (which saw Cuban league teams facing American barnstorming squads, often vacationing big-leaguers), played against the backdrop of an unpopular U.S. military occupation, were heavily political in tone. And those victories were responsible for creating the island’s earliest stars, for example, José de la Caridad Méndez (author of a string of scoreless innings on the mound against the visiting Cincinnati Reds) and Cristóbal Torriente (who struck three memorable homers to outperform Babe Ruth and the visiting New York Giants in 1920). Both pioneering Afro-Cubans would belatedly reach Cooperstown immortality in 2006, mostly on the strength of legendary feats authored against the visiting Americans. And Roberto González Echevarría, in The Pride of Havana, records that Méndez’s 1908 fall heroics stand as one of the great achievements of Cuban baseball history and lore precisely “not only because he had trounced the major leaguers, proving that Cuban baseball was as good as any, but also because he had done it during the American occupation of the island.”[16] And on a second front, charges of politicizing baseball would have to be equally levied at the Americans themselves, at MLB, in particular (with its ballpark pregame military flyovers, patriotic seventh-inning-stretch hymns, and Old
Glory team jersey flag patches), and at other nations devoted to the sport—especially those in Asia and most particularly Japan. Early on, baseball became directly connected with American imperialism, as demonstrated in fine detail by author Robert Elias in The Empire Strikes Out: How Baseball Sold U.S. Foreign Policy and Promoted the American Way Abroad (2010). The American national pastime grew up with militaristic overtones, and the story of American baseball's own foreign policy agendas and historic role in promoting U.S. diplomatic, military, and globalization policies is, as Elias rightfully emphasizes, the most overlooked corner of the sport's history.[17] The Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese followed this American model once they adopted their own versions of the so-called American pastime, and the theme of Asian “politicization” of the sport is also eloquently elaborated by Joseph Reaves in Taking in a Game: A History of Baseball in Asia (2002). Hence, baseball has a history in many nations as an instrument for spreading a country’s ingrained sets of values and traditions, as well as their cherished forms of economics, politics, and government. In using baseball to spread the image of his new socialist society, Fidel was only rather ironically following the well-established American model. And pervading this negativity is the widely popularized model of the young Fidel as a rising and self-deluded baseball prospect. It is an image usually presented with a hardy dose of skepticism and a distinct tone of sarcasm—“if he was such a baseball fanatic, then perhaps we should make him a more palatable czar, as baseball commissioner” or “he may not have owned a big-league fastball but he sure has been heaving political curveballs at us ever since” and so forth. This myth was not only very much a historical distortion of strictly North American origins, but also always used to treat the Cuban leader (and Cuban revolutionary society in general) in the most negative or demeaning possible light. It was largely a form of belittling Fidel and bringing him down to earth—it implied that his true passions were, nevertheless, tied to our own American game, and it was there (if not in larger political arenas) that we could dismiss him as a failure (“no true big-league fastball” after all). Reports of the July 1959 “Barbudos” pitching exhibition—with observations that an intimidated umpire was forced to call strikes with every limp delivery the comandante tossed at the plate—are one solid example. So is the tongue-in-cheek essay by former senator Eugene McCarthy in Elysian Fields Quarterly and the cartoon-style imitation baseball card cover that accompanied it (see chapter 3). Among early commentators on the Cuban Revolution, Herbert Matthews and Lee Lockwood both observed the unfortunate and always slanted treatment of Fidel and his revolution by the North American press. Matthews goes so far as to charge that the “press coverage of the Cuban Revolution is the worst failure in the history of American journalism.”[18] Lockwood laments that American press coverage of Fidel was from the outset “woefully inadequate” since “it reports only the negative aspects.”[19] These were charges made decades in the past. Yet, they underscore a pattern that has continued largely unabated to the present. To speak well of Fidel or his revolution, especially in a public forum, is to invite hostility, a harsh truth learned several years back by Miami Marlins manager Ozzie Guillen.[20] The Maximum Leader’s baseball connections and baseball adventures provide a special lightning rod. Justin Turner’s useful 2012 doctoral dissertation, Baseball Diplomacy, Baseball Deployment: The National Pastime in U.S.–Cuba Relations, cites a litany of American press articles covering sham Cuban amateurism during the 1960s and MLB-backed efforts at baseball détente in the 1970s. And it is the tone in which most of these articles in either the New York Times, Washington Post, or Christian Science Monitor are crafted that is most telling. [21] One of the most recent examples of U.S. press distortions related to Cuba lies in the treatment of Barack Obama’s December 2014 announcement for a planned détente with the continuing communist regime, now fronted by Raúl Castro. There was precious little reporting
on the Cuban interests in the matter or views concerning implications of such a Cold War sea
change. Instead, the focus was on the long-awaited dismantling of the Castro government,
which had obviously ruined Cuba in the minds of the South Florida exile community, or the
flood of anticipated new opportunities for lucrative American business ventures and a much-
coveted tourism explosion. For what was assumed to be a majority of Americans, the long-
forbidden Caribbean nation was assumed to be little more than a soon-to-be-possessed
fantasy tourist destination. Lost in the immediate hoopla of a new Havana gold mine of
opportunity was any appreciation of what the Cuban Revolution was originally all about or what
negatives might accrue to the Cuban people by a floodtide of sudden and exploitive American
capitalism. Once again, American journalists saw only the Cuba they wanted to see.

Recent changes in U.S.–Cuba Cold War relations were also badly misreported when it came to the
apparently evolving relationships between Cuban Baseball Federation officials and MLB
bosses. A September 2013 announcement of INDER’s expanded plans for new player
exchange possibilities was viewed only through a big-league business-oriented perspective. A
new-style Dominican Republic replete with unfettered MLB scouting operations and the
construction of dozens of big-league team-owned training academies was hopefully emerging,
with no attention paid to the disasters that such activities had actually already brought to the
Dominican or Venezuela. Almost no effort was made to understand the plan actually being
proposed by the Cubans, one that offered no possibilities of exchanges with MLB ballclubs or
anything approaching free agency for Cuban League athletes, but instead was aimed at
loaning select stars to the Japanese circuit and then recouping them for domestic winter-
league play. American concerns were the same as those a half-century back—the potential
flood of new Cuban talent to grace big-league ballparks. Once more, we had a failure of big-
league interests—including the fans who followed MLB clubs and the journalists that covered
them—to distinguish the forest from the trees.

It was decades of isolation—especially the
isolation of Cuban baseball—that had continued to feed such misunderstanding and, in the
end, even made it possible. Writers—journalists, travel writers, and novelists among them—
residing north of the Straits of Florida could make claims about Fidel or any aspect of Cuba
with no real need for accuracy and no real fear of contradiction. No one could be assumed to
know the difference and so any wild claim apparently stood on relatively safe ground. Even
some reputable reporters boasting actual time on the ground in Cuba could seemingly have a
free pass.

One brief illustration will serve the purpose here. Patrick Symmes, committed to
offering a view of Castro’s Cuba as a nightmare scene of desperation and despair, paints a
portrait (apparently designed to shock) of a visit to Latin American Stadium in Havana that is,
at best, distorted and, at worst, bad fiction.[22] The ballpark scene is first punctuated with a
near-riot among drunken and combative fans, an outbreak that requires police intervention.
And then a late-night return walk to his downtown hotel from the stadium grounds is marred
with a near-personal assault by a menacing pack of rowdy teens from whom Symmes has to
flee in pure panic. I have attended hundreds of games in that very park and also hiked from
there to the city center in the late evening hours on numerous occasions and have never
witnessed such scenes of horrifying violence. Indeed, Havana is unquestionably the safest city
I have ever encountered. The downside of so many such portraits of the Cuban scene is that
writers (usually short-term visitors) could always assume that few Americans would ever set
foot on the island to actually check out their often bias-tainted literary portraits. Exclusivity
seems the perfect entrée to literary license. * * * American misunderstanding of Fidel and his
revolution has therefore been as blatant when it comes to the shared national sport of baseball
as in any of the more serious reporting and popular assessments of Cold War–era U.S.–Cuba
relations. This book aims to clarify this too-often cloudy and usually distorted picture by providing a more balanced and accurate treatise on Fidel Castro’s central role in the past half-century of Cuba’s baseball evolution. Given the centrality of baseball to Cuban culture, such an account is hardly unimportant. Four overarching themes are central to the pages that follow. First, a dismantling of popular legends that Fidel Castro was once seen as a serious professional pitching prospect, that he was recruited or offered contracts by big-league scouts, or that a lost opportunity for chasing his big-league dreams rather than his revolutionary ones might have radically changed the course of a half-century of Western Hemisphere political and societal history. Second, disproving that Fidel was personally and solely responsible for shutting down professional baseball operations on the island and that the loss of affiliation with Organized Baseball in 1960 doomed the Cuban version to second-class legitimacy at best. Third, eradicating any notion that Fidel diminished Cuban baseball and Cuban sport in general by “politicizing” it in the service of propagandizing his Marxist/socialist/communist model and that he was somehow an unacceptable outlier in his efforts to use baseball in this particular fashion. And finally, in the process of achieving the above ends, to further demonstrate that the reigning myths surrounding Fidel Castro’s baseball connections are in large measure part and parcel of the overall mythology that has strenuously hidden any lucid portrait of the important Cuban leader and his resulting revolution from the American public’s view. Four early chapters deal with literature providing a rather outsized mythology surrounding Fidel Castro, the man and the revolutionary hero. Chapter 1, for example, discusses how and why Fidel emerged during the earliest years of his revolutionary struggle as a figure based more often on self-authored legends than any factual reality. That opening chapter chiefly focuses on the early 1960s-era debates between American journalists and Castro intimates Theodore Draper and Herbert Matthews, touching on two reigning fictions—that Fidel was actually a closet Communist long before his triumph over Batista and his seizure of national political power, and also that as a result of that supposed secret Marxist agenda, Fidel abandoned and distorted the original revolution he had initially planned—one based on democracy and increased economic prosperity, which many of his most ardent early supporters had hoped for. Chapters 2 and 3, in turn, explore the origins of additional myths that rapidly grew concerning Fidel’s alleged ball-playing skills. The notion of a talented pitching prospect coveted by big-league scouts is debunked through carefully analysis of false (often purposely distorted) reports like that of former big-leaguer Don Hoak, which originally planted the seeds for such fictions. And details surrounding the infamous July 1959 “Barbudos” game pitching exhibition offer further evidence for how the legend spread and how it shielded, and even obscured, Fidel’s far more important later baseball interests and contributions. Chapter 4 recounts the historical details surrounding the death of professional baseball in Cuba on the heels of the 1959 overthrow of Batista and the seizure of power by Fidel and his M-26-7 rebel movement. The thrust here is to dismantle a second major falsehood claiming that Fidel was personally and even solely responsible for killing baseball on the island. But a secondary theme is the argument that even if Fidel is assigned some responsibility for the abandonment of an American-backed professional sport in Havana—it was, after all, his revolution that created an environment quickly perceived as hostile to continued MLB business interests in Havana—the era that closed in 1960 and 1961 did not represent a golden age for the Cuban sport, as is often contended. That golden age would only dawn after Fidel’s arrival, and, in truth, Fidel himself would be its most notable author. Chapters 5 and 6 examine in further detail the actual role Fidel played in the construction of a new Cuban baseball culture and thus elaborate precisely how that baseball culture both reflected and served a drastically revamped Cuban society. The
first of these chapters reprises the Cuban domestic league from its birth with the new Law 936 of February 1961, through its peak years at century’s end, and eventually on to its diminished stature after massive ballplayer defections during the past half-dozen years. The second analyzes the emergence of a Cuban national team that would dominate the international tournament scene for decades and, in the process, write a remarkable legacy of unending victories rarely matched in any other realm of either professional or amateur team sports. Fictional accounts of Fidel’s mythical baseball career have also developed a life of their own and cannot be ignored here; therefore, chapter 7 examines how those who chronicled Fidel throughout the years in both fiction and scholarly biography treated the growing myth of Fidel the serious ballplayer. Absence of any even-limited discussion of baseball interest from the bulk of Fidel’s serious biographers reveals both a central notion that baseball fandom was judged insignificant in reporting on the weightier matters of Castro’s uprooting of Cuban culture and the slim evidence for the future leader’s ball-playing efforts during his younger years. Again, we can return to Robert González Echevarría’s explanation that “so many controversies have surrounded the Cuban Revolution that few have taken notice or given serious thought” to such trivial details as Castro’s baseball passions. But novelists are not historians, and for the fiction writer it is good story material that looms largest. Singled out for special attention among the fictional treatments are several novels that not only exploit the entertainment value of a Fidel ball-playing legend, but also actually detract from an existing historical record of Fidel’s altogether major accomplishments in the history of his nation’s baseball heritage. The book’s final two chapters explore the collapse of Fidel’s baseball dream in the aftermath of his debilitating 2006 illness and a long-delayed relinquishing of power to his brother Raúl and a younger generation of Cuban revolutionary leaders. Chapter 8 revisits the subject of massive player defections from the Cuban sport brought on by developments within Cuba after 2006—a subject already treated in my earlier book, Cuba’s Baseball Defectors—but again it is vital here to the full understanding of Fidel’s baseball empire. Revealed here is the no-longer-hidden saga of scandalous human tracking activities involved in Cuban ballplayer movements and the less-than-honest stance repeatedly taken by MLB ballclubs, player agents, and top team officials regarding these unsavory events. While player defections would signal the collapse of Fidel’s dream of a nonmaterialistic baseball enterprise and mark the dismantling of his showcase model of socialist baseball, they would, at the same time, underscore many of the criticisms Fidel had originally levied at the greed-driven American professional version of the game. Also not to be denied is the degree to which those same events also exposed the ultimate fatal flaws in Cuba’s own once-successful baseball operations. What had initially built Fidel’s once-impressive baseball empire was the very fabric that would eventually destroy it. A final chapter explores the slow death of the Cuban national sport during the past half-dozen years. It looks at the many failed efforts in earlier decades at achieving baseball détente between two baseball-loving nations and explains why that persistent détente dream was never actually a viable possibility. The roadblock to any accord always had everything to do with the clashing motives of the two baseball institutions, which today remain as irreconcilable as ever. This final segment of the book also explores not only how and why MLB was, in the end, destined to eventually win the baseball Cold War with Cuba, but also how that victory may prove substantially a pyrrhic one. It is important to note that this book was written by an American and not a Cuban. Nonetheless, it was written by an American with more time spent on Castro’s mysterious island than all but a handful of his own countrymen. Not having grown up on that island and experienced firsthand the earliest years within revolutionary Cuba, I can only rely for my views on reports delivered by those who actually were on the scene—the
champions of the revolution, as well as its fiercest opponents. This book will, of course, cause much negative reaction among those who can never accept any positive accounts touching on the homeland they left behind. I sympathize with those whose families suffered from the upheaval of the revolution. But I also reject what are oftentimes interpretations couched more in the bitterness of personal history than recent firsthand experience. For many, the myths will always remain more comfortable than any fact-based realities. For scribes reporting baseball or penning fiction, they will always prove far more marketable. As Bob Costas once reminded me, “The myth was always appealing—Don Hoak must have sensed that.” Yet, I also believe in the early wisdom of Lee Lockwood, who pointed out that, “If he is really our enemy we should know as much about him as possible.” That effort requires distinguishing the true reality from the grandiose mythology that has become Cuba’s Fidel Castro. This book will hopefully do that at least with the shared national pastime of baseball.

An additional criticism of Fidel’s baseball obsession cites its use for promoting advantages of Cuba’s revamped Marxist society. This was the accusation that Fidel had “politicized the sport” with the creation of INDER in 1962, and his forced linkage of the game to his revolution and its radical goals. But this again is a frivolous charge on at least two counts. Baseball had been directly connected to displays of Cuban nationalism decades before the arrival of Fidel Castro. Baseball jingoism was never more blatantly on display than it was with the adamant focus on Cuban team victories over American barnstormers during the first decade of the twentieth century. Wins in the so-called “American Seasons” of those early years (which saw Cuban league teams facing American barnstorming squads, often vacationing big-leaguers), played against the backdrop of an unpopular U.S. military occupation, were heavily political in tone. And those victories were responsible for creating the island’s earliest stars, for example, José de la Caridad Méndez (author of a string of scoreless innings on the mound against the visiting Cincinnati Reds) and Cristóbal Torriente (who struck three memorable homers to outperform Babe Ruth and the visiting New York Giants in 1920). Both pioneering Afro-Cubans would belatedly reach Cooperstown immortality in 2006, mostly on the strength of legendary feats authored against the visiting Americans. And Roberto González Echevarría, in The Pride of Havana, records that Méndez’s 1908 fall heroics stand as one of the great achievements of Cuban baseball history and lore precisely “not only because he had trounced the major leaguers, proving that Cuban baseball was as good as any, but also because he had done it during the American occupation of the island.” And on a second front, charges of politicizing baseball would have to be equally levied at the Americans themselves, at MLB, in particular (with its ballpark pregame military flyovers, patriotic seventh-inning-stretch hymns, and Old Glory team jersey flag patches), and at other nations devoted to the sport—especially those in Asia and most particularly Japan. Early on, baseball became directly connected with American imperialism, as demonstrated in fine detail by author Robert Elias in The Empire Strikes Out: How Baseball Sold U.S. Foreign Policy and Promoted the American Way Abroad (2010). The American national pastime grew up with militaristic overtones, and the story of American baseball’s own foreign policy agendas and historic role in promoting U.S. diplomatic, military, and globalization policies is, as Elias rightfully emphasizes, the most overlooked corner of the sport’s history. The Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese followed this American model once they adopted their own versions of the so-called American pastime, and the theme of Asian “politicization” of the sport is also eloquently elaborated by Joseph Reaves in Taking in a Game: A History of Baseball in Asia (2002). Hence, baseball has a history in many nations as an instrument for spreading a country’s ingrained sets of values and traditions, as well as their
cherished forms of economics, politics, and government. In using baseball to spread the image of his new socialist society, Fidel was only rather ironically following the well-established American model. And pervading this negativity is the widely popularized model of the young Fidel as a rising and self-deluded baseball prospect. It is an image usually presented with a hardy dose of skepticism and a distinct tone of sarcasm—"if he was such a baseball fanatic, then perhaps we should make him a more palatable czar, as baseball commissioner" or "he may not have owned a big-league fastball but he sure has been heaving political curveballs at us ever since" and so forth. This myth was not only very much a historical distortion of strictly North American origins, but also always used to treat the Cuban leader (and Cuban revolutionary society in general) in the most negative or demeaning possible light. It was largely a form of belittling Fidel and bringing him down to earth—it implied that his true passions were, nevertheless, tied to our own American game, and it was there (if not in larger political arenas) that we could dismiss him as a failure ("no true big-league fastball" after all).

Reports of the July 1959 "Barbudos" pitching exhibition—with observations that an intimidated umpire was forced to call strikes with every limp delivery the comandante tossed at the plate—are one solid example. So is the tongue-in-cheek essay by former senator Eugene McCarthy in Elysian Fields Quarterly and the cartoon-style imitation baseball card cover that accompanied it (see chapter 3). Among early commentators on the Cuban Revolution, Herbert Matthews and Lee Lockwood both observed the unfortunate and always slanted treatment of Fidel and his revolution by the North American press. Matthews goes so far as to charge that the "press coverage of the Cuban Revolution is the worst failure in the history of American journalism."[18] Lockwood laments that American press coverage of Fidel was from the outset "woefully inadequate" since "it reports only the negative aspects."[19] These were charges made decades in the past. Yet, they underscore a pattern that has continued largely unabated to the present. To speak well of Fidel or his revolution, especially in a public forum, is to invite hostility, a harsh truth learned several years back by Miami Marlins manager Ozzie Guillen.[20] The Maximum Leader's baseball connections and baseball adventures provide a special lightning rod. Justin Turner's useful 2012 doctoral dissertation, Baseball Diplomacy, Baseball Deployment: The National Pastime in U.S.–Cuba Relations, cites a litany of American press articles covering sham Cuban amateurism during the 1960s and MLB-backed efforts at baseball détente in the 1970s. And it is the tone in which most of these articles in either the New York Times, Washington Post, or Christian Science Monitor are crafted that is most telling.[21] One of the most recent examples of U.S. press distortions related to Cuba lies in the treatment of Barack Obama's December 2014 announcement for a planned détente with the continuing communist regime, now fronted by Raúl Castro. There was precious little reporting on the Cuban interests in the matter or views concerning implications of such a Cold War sea change. Instead, the focus was on the long-awaited dismantling of the Castro government, which had obviously ruined Cuba in the minds of the South Florida exile community, or the flood of anticipated new opportunities for lucrative American business ventures and a much-coveted tourism explosion. For what was assumed to be a majority of Americans, the long-forbidden Caribbean nation was assumed to be little more than a soon-to-be-possessed fantasy tourist destination. Lost in the immediate hoopla of a new Havana gold mine of opportunity was any appreciation of what the Cuban Revolution was originally all about or what negatives might accrue to the Cuban people by a floodtide of sudden and exploitive American capitalism. Once again, American journalists saw only the Cuba they wanted to see. Recent changes in U.S.–Cuba Cold War relations were also badly misreported when it came to the apparently evolving relationships between Cuban Baseball Federation officials and MLB
bosses. A September 2013 announcement of INDER's expanded plans for new player exchange possibilities was viewed only through a big-league business-oriented perspective. A new-style Dominican Republic replete with unfettered MLB scouting operations and the construction of dozens of big-league team-owned training academies was hopefully emerging, with no attention paid to the disasters that such activities had actually already brought to the Dominican or Venezuela. Almost no effort was made to understand the plan actually being proposed by the Cubans, one that offered no possibilities of exchanges with MLB ballclubs or anything approaching free agency for Cuban League athletes, but instead was aimed at loaning select stars to the Japanese circuit and then recouping them for domestic winter-league play. American concerns were the same as those a half-century back—the potential flood of new Cuban talent to grace big-league ballparks. Once more, we had a failure of big-league interests—including the fans who followed MLB clubs and the journalists that covered them—to distinguish the forest from the trees. It was decades of isolation—especially the isolation of Cuban baseball—that had continued to feed such misunderstanding and, in the end, even made it possible. Writers—journalists, travel writers, and novelists among them—residing north of the Straits of Florida could make claims about Fidel or any aspect of Cuba with no real need for accuracy and no real fear of contradiction. No one could be assumed to know the difference and so any wild claim apparently stood on relatively safe ground. Even some reputable reporters boasting actual time on the ground in Cuba could seemingly have a free pass. One brief illustration will serve the purpose here. Patrick Symmes, committed to offering a view of Castro's Cuba as a nightmare scene of desperation and despair, paints a portrait (apparently designed to shock) of a visit to Latin American Stadium in Havana that is, at best, distorted and, at worst, bad fiction.[22] The ballpark scene is first punctuated with a near-riot among drunken and combative fans, an outbreak that requires police intervention. And then a late-night return walk to his downtown hotel from the stadium grounds is marred with a near-personal assault by a menacing pack of rowdy teens from whom Symmes has to flee in pure panic. I have attended hundreds of games in that very park and also hiked from there to the city center in the late evening hours on numerous occasions and have never witnessed such scenes of horrifying violence. Indeed, Havana is unquestionably the safest city I have ever encountered. The downside of so many such portraits of the Cuban scene is that writers (usually short-term visitors) could always assume that few Americans would ever set foot on the island to actually check out their often bias-tainted literary portraits. Exclusivity seems the perfect entrée to literary license. * * * American misunderstanding of Fidel and his revolution has therefore been as blatant when it comes to the shared national sport of baseball as in any of the more serious reporting and popular assessments of Cold War–era U.S.–Cuba relations. This book aims to clarify this too-often cloudy and usually distorted picture by providing a more balanced and accurate treatise on Fidel Castro's central role in the past half-century of Cuba's baseball evolution. Given the centrality of baseball to Cuban culture, such an account is hardly unimportant. Four overarching themes are central to the pages that follow. First, a dismantling of popular legends that Fidel Castro was once seen as a serious professional pitching prospect, that he was recruited or offered contracts by big-league scouts, or that a lost opportunity for chasing his big-league dreams rather than his revolutionary ones might have radically changed the course of a half-century of Western Hemisphere political and societal history. Second, disproving that Fidel was personally and solely responsible for shutting down professional baseball operations on the island and that the loss of affiliation with Organized Baseball in 1960 doomed the Cuban version to second-class legitimacy at best. Third, eradicating any notion that Fidel diminished Cuban baseball and Cuban sport in general
by “politicizing” it in the service of propagandizing his Marxist/socialist/communist model and that he was somehow an unacceptable outlier in his efforts to use baseball in this particular fashion. And finally, in the process of achieving the above ends, to further demonstrate that the reigning myths surrounding Fidel Castro’s baseball connections are in large measure part and parcel of the overall mythology that has strenuously hidden any lucid portrait of the important Cuban leader and his resulting revolution from the American public’s view.

Four early chapters deal with literature providing a rather outsized mythology surrounding Fidel Castro, the man and the revolutionary hero. Chapter 1, for example, discusses how and why Fidel emerged during the earliest years of his revolutionary struggle as a figure based more often on self-authored legends than any factual reality. That opening chapter chiefly focuses on the early 1960s-era debates between American journalists and Castro intimates Theodore Draper and Herbert Matthews, touching on two reigning fictions—that Fidel was actually a closet Communist long before his triumph over Batista and his seizure of national political power, and also that as a result of that supposed secret Marxist agenda, Fidel abandoned and distorted the original revolution he had initially planned—one based on democracy and increased economic prosperity, which many of his most ardent early supporters had hoped for.

Chapters 2 and 3, in turn, explore the origins of additional myths that rapidly grew concerning Fidel’s alleged ball-playing skills. The notion of a talented pitching prospect coveted by big-league scouts is debunked through carefully analysis of false (often purposely distorted) reports like that of former big-leaguer Don Hoak, which originally planted the seeds for such fictions. And details surrounding the infamous July 1959 “Barbudos” game pitching exhibition offer further evidence for how the legend spread and how it shielded, and even obscured, Fidel’s far more important later baseball interests and contributions.

Chapter 4 recounts the historical details surrounding the death of professional baseball in Cuba on the heels of the 1959 overthrow of Batista and the seizure of power by Fidel and his M-26-7 rebel movement. The thrust here is to dismantle a second major falsehood claiming that Fidel was personally and even solely responsible for killing baseball on the island. But a secondary theme is the argument that even if Fidel is assigned some responsibility for the abandonment of an American-backed professional sport in Havana—it was, after all, his revolution that created an environment quickly perceived as hostile to continued MLB business interests in Havana—the era that closed in 1960 and 1961 did not represent a golden age for the Cuban sport, as is often contended. That golden age would only dawn after Fidel’s arrival, and, in truth, Fidel himself would be its most notable author.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine in further detail the actual role Fidel played in the construction of a new Cuban baseball culture and thus elaborate precisely how that baseball culture both reflected and served a drastically revamped Cuban society. The first of these chapters reprises the Cuban domestic league from its birth with the new Law 936 of February 1961, through its peak years at century’s end, and eventually on to its diminished stature after massive ballplayer defections during the past half-dozen years. The second analyzes the emergence of a Cuban national team that would dominate the international tournament scene for decades and, in the process, write a remarkable legacy of unending victories rarely matched in any other realm of either professional or amateur team sports.

Fictional accounts of Fidel’s mythical baseball career have also developed a life of their own and cannot be ignored here; therefore, chapter 7 examines how those who chronicled Fidel throughout the years in both fiction and scholarly biography treated the growing myth of Fidel the serious ballplayer. Absence of any even-limited discussion of baseball interest from the bulk of Fidel’s serious biographers reveals both a central notion that baseball fandom was judged insignificant in reporting on the weightier matters of Castro’s uprooting of Cuban culture.
and the slim evidence for the future leader’s ball-playing efforts during his younger years. Again, we can return to Robert González Echevarría’s explanation that “so many controversies have surrounded the Cuban Revolution that few have taken notice or given serious thought” to such trivial details as Castro’s baseball passions. But novelists are not historians, and for the fiction writer it is good story material that looms largest. Singled out for special attention among the fictional treatments are several novels that not only exploit the entertainment value of a Fidel ball-playing legend, but also actually detract from an existing historical record of Fidel’s altogether major accomplishments in the history of his nation’s baseball heritage. The book’s final two chapters explore the collapse of Fidel’s baseball dream in the aftermath of his debilitating 2006 illness and a long-delayed relinquishing of power to his brother Raúl and a younger generation of Cuban revolutionary leaders. Chapter 8 revisits the subject of massive player defections from the Cuban sport brought on by developments within Cuba after 2006—a subject already treated in my earlier book, Cuba’s Baseball Defectors—but again it is vital here to the full understanding of Fidel’s baseball empire. Revealed here is the no-longer-hidden saga of scandalous human tracking activities involved in Cuban ballplayer movements and the less-than-honest stance repeatedly taken by MLB ballclubs, player agents, and top team officials regarding these unsavory events. While player defections would signal the collapse of Fidel’s dream of a nonmaterialistic baseball enterprise and mark the dismantling of his showcase model of socialist baseball, they would, at the same time, underscore many of the criticisms Fidel had originally levied at the greed-driven American professional version of the game. Also not to be denied is the degree to which those same events also exposed the ultimate fatal flaws in Cuba’s own once-successful baseball operations. What had initially built Fidel’s once-impressive baseball empire was the very fabric that would eventually destroy it. A final chapter explores the slow death of the Cuban national sport during the past half-dozen years. It looks at the many failed efforts in earlier decades at achieving baseball détente between two baseball-loving nations and explains why that persistent détente dream was never actually a viable possibility. The roadblock to any accord always had everything to do with the clashing motives of the two baseball institutions, which today remain as irreconcilable as ever. This final segment of the book also explores not only how and why MLB was, in the end, destined to eventually win the baseball Cold War with Cuba, but also how that victory may prove substantially a pyrrhic one. It is important to note that this book was written by an American and not a Cuban. Nonetheless, it was written by an American with more time spent on Castro’s mysterious island than all but a handful of his own countrymen. Not having grown up on that island and experienced firsthand the earliest years within revolutionary Cuba, I can only rely for my views on reports delivered by those who actually were on the scene—the champions of the revolution, as well as its fiercest opponents. This book will, of course, cause much negative reaction among those who can never accept any positive accounts touching on the homeland they left behind. I sympathize with those whose families suffered from the upheaval of the revolution. But I also reject what are oftentimes interpretations couched more in the bitterness of personal history than recent firsthand experience. For many, the myths will always remain more comfortable than any fact-based realities. For scribes reporting baseball or penning fiction, they will always prove far more marketable. As Bob Costas once reminded me, “The myth was always appealing—Don Hoak must have sensed that.”[23] Yet, I also believe in the early wisdom of Lee Lockwood, who pointed out that, “If he is really our enemy we should know as much about him as possible.”[24] That effort requires distinguishing the true reality from the grandiose mythology that has become Cuba’s Fidel Castro. This book will hopefully do that at least with the shared national pastime of baseball. 1.Roberto González Echevarría, The
Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 352.2. González Echevarría, The Pride of Havana, 352–53.4. González Echevarría, The Pride of Havana, 352.5. Thomas G. Paterson, Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 50–51.6. Robert E. Quirk, “Review: Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Castro Revolution by Thomas G. Paterson,” Journal of American History 82, no. 1 (June 1995): 357.7. “Fidel Castro has stamped his seal on Cuba and it can never be erased. His influence on hemispheric affairs is still uncertain, although it is obviously great. He is the first man in the history of Latin America to achieve worldwide stature and fame during his lifetime.” (Herbert L. Matthews, Fidel Castro [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969], 16.)8. Geyer (referring to the 30th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1989) continues, “From Mexico to Moscow to Managua, and from the Universities of Minnesota, Mainz, and Minsk, Fidel Castro remained the single modern revolutionary of epicentral consequence.” (Georgie Anne Geyer, Guerrilla Prince: The Untold Story of Fidel Castro [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991], 3.)9. “No one has written or can claim to write about Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution with objectivity, impartiality, balance, lack of bias, or whatever attitude may be considered devoid of emotion.” (Herbert L. Matthews, Revolution in Cuba: An Essay in Understanding [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975], 2.)10. Numerous sources document the various unsuccessful attempts on Castro’s life, many of them bungled, harebrained schemes of cartoonish quality (at least one involved an exploding baseball), and many orchestrated by the CIA. At the time of Fidel’s death in November 2016, one online story cited the former head of Cuban intelligence, Fabian Escalante, telling a British documentary crew that the CIA made more than 600 attempts during a span of four decades to eliminate Castro (Escalante’s list of attempts per administration is as follows: Eisenhower 38, Kennedy 42, Johnson 72, Nixon 184, Carter 64, Reagan 197, Bush Sr. 16, Clinton 21). Escalante may have exaggerated, but recently declassified CIA reports indicate there were indeed numerous such efforts. (“How Castro Survived 638 Very Cunning Assassination Attempts,” ABC.net, November 28, 2016, .)11. Bourne suggests that Washington operatives believed the Mob would be highly motivated to see Fidel eliminated so they could reestablish lucrative gambling and prostitution operations in the Cuban capital city. (Peter G. Bourne, Fidel: A Biography of Fidel Castro [New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1988], 212–14.) A full and enlightening history of anti-Castro counterrevolutionary activities on the island (sponsored, in large part, by Washington and the Miami Cuban exile community) is provided by Jesús Arboleya, The Cuban Counterrevolution, trans. Damián Donéstevez (Havana: Editorial José Martí, 2002).12. When Raúl Castro retired from office in April 2018, and was succeeded by Miguel Díaz-Canel as the country’s 19th president, North American media widely and inaccurately reported that Cuba was finally without a president or leader named Castro for the first time since 1959. It was another blatant example of shallow American press attention to the facts of Cuban political history. Between 1959 and 1976, Fidel was the country’s prime minister and not its president until the two offices were finally merged. Furthermore, the true political leader of Cuba is not the president, but rather the first secretary of the Communist Party, a position Raúl still retains.13. Peter C. Bjarkman, Cuba’s Baseball Defectors: The Inside Story (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xv.14. “No one can deny that Fidel Castro and his revolution have brought tragedy to thousands of Cuban families. Revolutions can no more be made without bringing suffering to many people than wars can be fought without sacrificing lives.” (Matthews, Fidel Castro, 345.)15. César Brioso, “How Fidel Castro’s Revolution Ended Professional Baseball in Cuba,” USA Today, November 27, 2016, . Brioso presents the identical

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