

The business of baseball and the Cuban national pastime

By Carl Bronski
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As hundreds of salivating U.S. executives from the telecommunications, heavy equipment, foodstuffs, hotel, air and cruise line industries were packing their bags last month to accompany President Barack Obama on his trip to Havana, only the most avid of sports aficionados would have noticed the arrival at Miami airport of Yuliesky and Lourdes Gourriel Jr., brothers from one of the most legendary Cuban baseball families to ever lace on spikes in the *Serie Nacional*. Both brothers stand to sign monster, multi-million dollar contracts with Major League Baseball teams later this year.

The brothers' arrival came only days before a revision in U.S. Treasury Department regulations that would allow American companies to directly hire Cuban baseball players (and other athletes and artists) and pay them in excess of normal living expenses. Prior to this revision in the statutes, Cuban ballplayers were required to first set up residency in a third country before applying from there for permission to seek employment in American professional baseball leagues.

This third country interregnum requirement had been for more than a decade the established method by which Cuban athletes could seek employment in the United States. This method, however, was fraught with danger, often involving clandestine midnight boat rides from Cuban shores organized by criminal gangs and human traffickers. Upon arrival in a third country such as Mexico, Haiti or the Dominican Republic, the defecting players would often be held hostage by the gangsters until they signed baseball contracts with American teams and agreed to turn over a significant portion of their signing bonus to the traffickers.

Some athletes and artists tried the more direct "dry foot" route directly into the United States but with much less success. American immigration policy allows for defectors from Cuba to claim landed immigrant status should they manage to reach dry land (usually in Florida). However, should a boat carrying defectors be intercepted whilst still on water (or even on mud or swampland) by U.S. authorities, the passengers would be summarily sent back to Cuba where a jail sentence or other sanctions awaited.

Baseball fans will be familiar with the trials and tribulations of star players like Yasiel Puig, Yunel Escobar, Yuniesky Betancourt and Leonys Martin.

Puig, who had twice failed to defect directly to the United States, eventually was spirited to Mexico by human traffickers. There, he was held for months in a Yucatan motel by the Zetas cartel who sent regular threats to Puig's agent that they would soon be shipping the outfielder's fingers or even an arm by special delivery unless a suitable arrangement was worked out.

Martin was held at gunpoint for weeks until he agreed to pay 30 percent of his earnings to the gangsters. Smugglers demanded Escobar's agent pay a \$150,000 "ransom" if he was to be released from their clutches. Less skilled ballplayers who accompanied Escobar were "auctioned off" to interested agents. Betancourt, who reportedly stopped payments to a criminal gang after his release, faced threats of physical violence throughout his major league career.

By 2007, describing matters like a mining executive might speak of a mother-lode of valuable ore buried in rough terrain, agent Joe Kehoskie gushed, "There's at least half a billion dollars of baseball talent in Cuba right now and probably a lot more". The trick was to get it. Such was "the business of baseball" after the occasional dribble of professional talent just before the turn of the new century steadily grew into a torrent.

The path taken to Miami by the Gourriels, however, is of a piece with internal economic reforms first initiated by Raul Castro in 2010 combined with the more recent rapprochement with the United States.

Reeling under the continued pressure of the U.S. economic embargo and the fall-out from the global economic crisis, Cuban President Raul Castro launched in 2010 a two-phase 300-point plan that represented the deepest changes to the Cuban economy since the taking of power by the Castro regime in 1959. Like austerity plans being carried out elsewhere in the world, the aim of these measures was to make the Cuban working class pay for the world capitalist crisis through mass layoffs, privatization, speed-ups, and the elimination of social welfare measures.

Plans were made to lay off half a million workers in state-owned industries. State-owned companies were to be sold off. The hiring of labor by individuals and property transfers would be permitted. Health and welfare spending was cut. At the port of Mariel, a massive Chinese style "free-enterprise zone" was authorized where labor, tax and customs laws would be suspended. The 2013 Second Phase consolidated the moves toward the privatization of state-owned companies and floated plans to unify the two-pronged Cuban currency system.

Social inequality, poverty and increased class tensions rapidly began to increase on the island.

In 2007, there were still only ten Cubans in Major League Baseball. That number would nearly triple over the next seven years on top of more than a hundred Cuban defectors signed to minor league professional contracts in the United States.

Faced with a rash of very high profile defections – world record fire-baller Aroldis Chapman in 2009, five tool phenomenon Yoenis Cespedes in 2011, Puig in 2012 and home run king Jose Abreu in 2013—the Cuban government included changes to its sports policies

alongside a second package of wide-ranging economic reforms introduced in the summer of 2013.

By the end of that year, select Cuban ballplayers would be allowed to play professionally in Japan, Canada, Colombia and Mexico as long as they remitted 10 to 30 percent of their earnings to the government and pledged to return to play in international tournaments and the Cuban winter league. In addition, Cuban player salary caps on the island would be lifted. Prior to 2013, top tier Cuban players earned only \$50 U.S. per month to play in the *Serie Nacional*. But now star players began to see their salaries jump by ten-fold and even more overnight. Yuliesky Gourriel, considered one of the best third basemen currently playing on the planet saw his salary increase to nearly \$1,200 per month—a paltry sum by international standards but a princely income in Cuba.

The following year, seven Cuban stars would sign officially sanctioned overseas contracts. Yuliesky Gourriel joined the Yokohama DeNa BayStars in the Japanese League on a one-year, one million dollar deal with only a ten percent remittance to the Cuban government. His older brother, Yuniesky, would sign with a Canadian team in a Can-Am Independent League, whilst youngest brother Lourdes followed in 2015 with a tentative deal in Japan. In February of 2016, Yuliesky and Lourdes, in a strange, semi-official “defection” intended to force matters along, walked away from the National Team after a tournament in the Dominican Republic and declared their intention to seek employment with Major League Baseball (MLB) in the United States.

At last month’s “Baseball Summit” in Cuba, along with Obama and his 1,200 strong corporate delegation, MLB sent its own 200-person contingent including Commissioner Rob Manfred. The Tampa Bay Rays, which played an exhibition game against the Cuban National team during Obama’s visit, went further, opening an office in Havana.

A number of serious hurdles remain, however, before full normalization of relations between Cuban and American baseball authorities. Primary amongst them, of course, is the Congressional legislation enforcing the continuation of the general economic embargo against Cuba. Cuban officials have insisted that any arrangement allowing Cuban ballplayers to legally sign with American teams must be accompanied by compensation payments made by MLB to either the Cuban government or a joint U.S.-Cuban non-profit entity that would plough monies back into Cuban sports programs. In return, the Cuban government would withdraw demands requiring expatriate players to return to the island for the winter league.

Already in most countries where professional baseball is played, MLB has agreements in place to pay foreign teams “posting fees” for signing away their home-grown talent. These fees can be quite enormous. Until recently, MLB teams were paying Japanese team owners a minimum of \$50 million to transfer each of their super-stars. The provisions were only recently re-negotiated. It now costs a MLB team \$20 million to buy the rights to negotiate with a Japanese player.

Revenues for MLB last year topped a whopping \$9 billion—about 12 percent of the entire Cuban GDP. Almost a billion dollars have been paid to a handful of Cuban stars over the past four years. The Los Angeles Dodgers alone have spent \$200 million in that time frame for nine players.

In 2015, almost 150 Cuban players defected, most of them to the United States. This migration has virtually hollowed out the winter league *Serie Nacional*. Attendance has plummeted throughout Cuba.

Sportswriters fill their columns with complaints about the embarrassingly poor quality of play in the country’s proud national pastime. Such is the dearth of established talent that this year, eight of the 16 teams in the league were disbanded halfway through the schedule so that the better ballplayers could join the more elite teams and improve the on-field spectacle. Last year the National Team tumbled to an unprecedented sixth place in an international tournament.

The decline has not gone un-noticed by American officials. With fewer highly skilled prospects remaining on the island, U.S. negotiators have sought more concessions from the Cuban government in hammering out the framework for official transfer deals.

Baseball in Cuba has held a certain cultural pride of place amongst the general population of the island for over a century. Brought to Cuba by returning students and sailors in the 1860’s, the game quickly took on dimensions much wider than a simple sporting experience. The first professional league, established in the late 1860’s, funneled monies to nationalist guerrilla units fighting the Spanish colonial regime. After an anti-colonial uprising was crushed in 1869, the Spaniards banned the game as a subversive activity of the unwashed masses, promoting in its place the much more staid and aristocratic bull-fight. With that, baseball became an integral part of the Cuban culture.

In the 20th century, Cubans introduced baseball throughout Latin America. Fully integrated since the game’s inception, Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers established his team’s spring training camp in Havana in 1947 in preparation for breaking MLB’s color bar that year with the legendary Jackie Robinson. After the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship, Fidel Castro proclaimed athletes to be the “standard-bearers of the revolution, playing for the love of the people, not money”. In more recent times, a wildly popular 2008 Cuban pop song asks the question “Is it possible that without baseball, we could not dream?”

From 1987 to 1997, the Cuban National Team won 156 consecutive games gathering numerous world championships and Olympic gold medals. The extraordinary medal run began at the 1988 World Championships in Italy with Lourdes Gourriel Senior’s dramatic home run in the ninth inning that led to the defeat of the much-vaunted American team. But the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent dire economic conditions of the “Special Period” in Cuba saw the beginnings of a precipitous decline in living standards. With it came the first defections; a few players at first, then dozens and now hundreds.

As the Cuban government increases the pace of its rapprochement with US imperialism and its full integration into the world capitalist economy, the *Serie Nacional* is fast joining its counter-parts in the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Venezuela as little more than another cog in the global conveyor belt that is the American baseball industry.

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