



>> Many young boys look for a way out of poor villages by playing baseball like these kids in Trinidad, Cuba and they idolize star players who made it to the United States like sluggers Yoenis Cespedes and Yasiel Puig.

Mashan Zaidan/istock.com

THE CULTURE OF LATIN BASEBALL BÉISBOL HAS BEEN VERY, VERY GOOD TO US

by Sean Chaffin

The crack of the bat and smell of freshly cut grass have been delayed a bit this season. As the United States deals with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Major League Baseball postponed opening day at least eight weeks from the original start of the season on March 26. Not only are fans dealing with the challenges faced by the country's oldest sports league, but baseball diehards in Latin America are also waiting for home runs and strikeouts from some of their favorite homegrown players.

Many of these regions that boast some of the greatest cigars and tobacco are also baseball mad – with that love for a bat, ball and glove fostered at an early age. Whether pitching on a diamond in Havana or playing some stickball on the streets of Santo Domingo, there's a passion for baseball in Latin America that has sent numerous players to the major leagues. Many have escaped poverty and become the pride of their home country, and many have been enshrined in the Hall of Fame.



>> Boston Red Sox pitcher Luis "El Tante" Tiant looking Cuban cool outside of Fenway Park in the 1970s. He was inducted into the Red Sox Hall of Fame in 1997.



>> Pitcher Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez (right) and Master Cigar Roller Manuel Medina (left) are the creators of Cigar El Duque 28.



>> Yasiel Puig (known for his quirky habit of licking his bat) picks out a stick and likely does the same to his cigar.

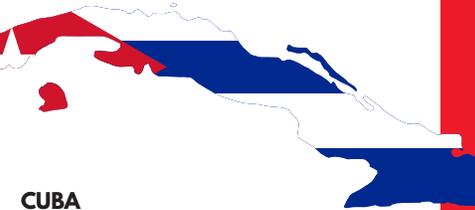


>> Yoenis Cespedes of the New York Mets celebrates after his team clinched the National League Pennant in 2016.

Photo courtesy of El Duque Cigars.

Photo courtesy of ESPN.com.

Photo credit: Reddit.com.



CUBA

Even this country's infamous communist dictator Fidel Castro was at one time a baseball player. Castro was an amateur player and longtime fan. However, he banned the island's capitalist professional leagues after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The country now hosts only amateur leagues with top players sent to the Cuban national baseball team. After Castro's takeover, baseball became a sport to reinforce Cuban nationalistic pride.

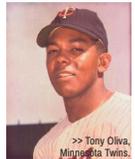
"We can say that our athletes are the children of our Revolution and, at the same time, the standard-bearers of that same Revolution," Castro noted.

The average Cuban wage is about \$25-30 a month, so it's understandable why talented players would make the harrowing journey north for a shot at MLB riches. Even a minor league salary is nice in comparison to life on the island. Former Miami Marlins pitcher Jose Fernandez actually rescued his mother from drowning while fleeing the island at age 15. (Sadly, he would die in a boating accident in 2016 at the age of 24.)

Other prominent Cuban players include Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez, his brother Liván, Yoenis Cespedes, Yasiel Puig, Jose Abreu, Tony Oliva, Tony Perez, Jose Canseco and numerous others. "El Duque" is a renowned cigar smoker, and had ample opportunity to light up as a four-time World Series champion with the New York Yankees from 1998 through 2000, and again in 2005. He even had a line of cigars (blended by the respected Manuel Onelio Medina) and a line of accessories.

Baseball's history on the island dates to the 1860s when students returning from the United States began playing. The Spanish banned the sport in 1869, and it then became associated with freedom and Cuban independence. Estevan Bellán became the first Latin-born athlete to play professional baseball in the States, manning third base for the Troy Haymakers and New York Mutuals from 1868-73.

Luis Tiant was one of the island's best, pitching in the majors for 19 years mostly for the Cleveland Indians and Boston Red Sox. Before that, he'd also taken the mound for the Havana Sugar Kings. Years later, Tiant would take on the Cuban pastime of smoking cigars. His El Tante cigar line launched in 2009, using the nickname from his playing days. A smoker since the age of 17, the legendary pitcher could often be seen with a stogie in his mouth celebrating after games.

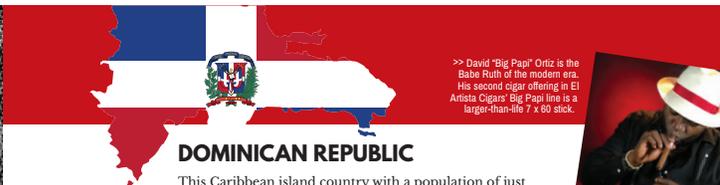


>> Tony Oliva, Minnesota Twins.



>> Albert Pujols of the Los Angeles Angels is a shoo-in as a first ballot Hall of Famer once he hangs up his spikes.

Photo courtesy of MLB.com



>> David "Big Papi" Ortiz is the Babe Ruth of the modern era. His second cigar offering in El Artista Cigars' Big Papi line is a larger-than-life 7 x 60 stick.



Photo courtesy of El Artista

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

This Caribbean island country with a population of just under 11 million has produced some of the game's best. The country boasts luminaries like Sammy Sosa, Pedro Martinez, David Ortiz, Albert Pujols, Juan Marichal and many others. The game is the country's most popular sport and the Dominican supplies the second-most players in MLB after those who are American-born.

Cuban immigrants introduced baseball to the Dominican Republic in the late 19th Century and for many youngsters, baseball is a way to escape poverty. Despite an improved economic outlook in recent years, about 23 percent remain impoverished. Every Major League team has an academy on the island to recruit and develop players. Boys as young as 13 drop out of school, and focus more on their skills on the baseball diamond. David "Big Papi" Ortiz of Boston Red Sox fame knows first-hand how baseball can offer hope to kids seeking a better life, and he's the owner of the "Big Papi" brand of cigars produced by Tabacalera El Artista SRL.

"When you talk about where I'm from, there's a lot of harsh reality," he wrote in the Players' Tribune in 2015. "The poverty, the crime. But the people are some of the most loyal, joyful people you're going to find on earth. We're survivors. We just find a way.

"When I was a little kid, we didn't have money for real baseballs. So on Three Kings Day, my sister got a new baby doll. I figured she wasn't gonna use the old one, so I chopped off the head and shaved all the hair off. It made for a perfect baseball."

NICARAGUA

Baseball remains the national pastime in this Central American country of about six million people. American businessman Albert Addlesberg brought the game to the country in the 1880s, convincing two cricket clubs to switch to baseball. The game has been a major part of Nicaraguan life ever since, and now has a pro league with four teams and numerous amateur organizations.

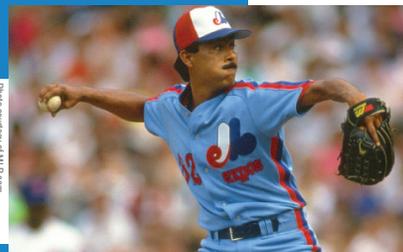


Photo courtesy of MLB.com

>> Dennis "El Presidente" Martinez amassed an impressive 245 wins over his career spanning from 1976 to 1998.

While fewer players from Nicaragua have played in the majors, Everth Cabrera, Erasmo Ramirez, and Cheslor Cuthbert all have recently represented their country in MLB. One of the country's most successful players is Dennis "El Presidente" Martinez. Martinez recorded a formidable 245 wins from 1976 to 1998.

Erasmo Ramirez's ascent to baseball stardom typifies the rise of many young stars in Latin America. At age 12, Ramirez left his home in Nicaragua to attend an academy in El Salvador that specialized in coaching baseball and soccer players. MLB teams scout players all through Latin America and he was spotted by the Seattle Mariners, eventually joining the team's farm system.

"He had a good arm, an average arm," academy founder Jorge Bahaia told the Seattle Times. "Credit the kid — he has been working very hard. Our coaches tried as much as possible to give him all the tools to help his mechanics. We sent him to several baseball camps so he could improve his skills."

Ramirez's hard work has led to a career in the big leagues since 2012. That passion for the game continues to inspire others.



VENEZUELA

Like the country itself, the baseball scene in this South American country has fallen on hard times in recent years. As the country faces internal struggles, scarcity of goods, and an exodus of its citizens, the country's pro league has also struggled. Venezuela once produced baseball stars and served as the home for winter ball – a place for players to hone their skills during the offseason.

In 2019, however, MLB banned players from playing in the Venezuelan Professional Baseball League after the Trump administration embraced embargoes against the country – aimed at toppling strongman dictator Nicolas Maduro. The strained relations between Venezuela and the United States, as well as high crime rates, have limited scouting efforts in the country in recent years. At one time, Venezuela had the third-most players in MLB, but that may trend downward after recent events.



The sport was introduced in the country in the 1910s by Americans working in the growing oil industry. The South American nation of 32 million has produced numerous stars including Luis Aparicio, Miguel Cabrera, Andres Galarraga and Dave Concepcion. Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Brusdar Graterol recently spoke with MLB.com about his life growing up playing baseball in a small farming community in Venezuela. The 25-year-old All Star's story is echoed by many of the more than 100 players on Major League rosters. Raised by his mother and grandparents, he began playing at age 8 – pitching and batting in the streets as he grew older.

After being rejected by a Venezuelan baseball academy, Graterol continued to work and train. It paid off and he signed with the Minnesota Twins in 2014 at age 16. With the current climate in his home country, however, he's afraid young players may not have the opportunities he's had.

"It's a shame because there's a lot of talent, but it's kind of going to waste," he said. "It seems a lot of it is getting forgotten."

LIKE THE COUNTRY ITSELF, THE BASEBALL SCENE IN THIS SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRY HAS FALLEN ON HARD TIMES IN RECENT YEARS. AS THE COUNTRY FACES INTERNAL STRUGGLES, SCARCITY OF GOODS, AND AN EXODUS OF ITS CITIZENS, THE COUNTRY'S PRO LEAGUE HAS ALSO STRUGGLED.

>> Five-time MLB All-Star and Venezuelan-born Andres "The Big Cat" Galarraga taking one of his final at-bats in an illustrious career during a New York Mets Spring Training game in 2005.



>> Venezuela's Miguel Cabrera is one of the most feared hitters of his generation.

Photo: Wexler/Shutterstock.com



>> Whether it's played on concrete, dirt, roads or fields of grass, the joy of playing baseball is universal.

Photo: Shutterstock.com



PUERTO RICO

As an American territory, Puerto Rico has a long history with both the United States and baseball. The game was introduced in the late 1800s, and local teams regularly beat teams of American players. Emilio Navarro became the first Puerto Rican to play in the Negro Leagues in 1928. Hiram Bithorn followed him as the first to play in the major leagues in 1942, pitching for the Chicago Cubs. More than 100 players are now on big league rosters.



>> Orlando Cepeda, San Francisco Giants.

The sport remains extremely popular and visitors on a quick drive around the island will find plenty of baseball fields in the metropolitan area of San Juan to colonial Ponce in the south to the tourist destination of Fajardo on the east coast. The island has hosted its own professional league since 1938 with five teams currently battling it out each season for a title.

Young Puerto Ricans dream of becoming the next Ivan Rodriguez, Carlos Beltran, Orlando Cepeda, Juan Gonzalez or Jorge Posada. The most honored Puerto Rican player is Roberto Clemente, a Hall of

Famer and 15-time All Star for the Pittsburgh Pirates. The youngest of seven children, Clemente worked in the country's sugar fields loading trucks with his father as a youngster. He shined on the baseball diamond in his hometown of Barrio San Antón and joined the island's amateur league at age 16.

In 1952 at the age of 18, Clemente began playing in the island's pro league before signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He played in the minors, and was eventually acquired by the Pirates before making his Major League debut in 1955. He was named National League MVP in 1966 and World Series MVP in 1971. Clemente remains one of the most successful Latin American players in history, and an idol to many. In 1972 at the age of 38, Clemente died in a plane crash while delivering supplies to the victims of the Nicaragua earthquake. Clemente's humanitarian efforts were the inspiration for MLB's Roberto Clemente Award. It is awarded annually to those who best exemplify the game of baseball, sportsmanship, community service and the individual's contribution to his team.

"I am convinced that God wanted me to be a baseball player," he once said. "I was born to play baseball."

Sean Chaffin is a freelance writer in Crandall, Texas, and the writer and host of the True Gambling Stories podcast. His work appears in numerous websites and publications. Follow him on Twitter @PokerTraditions.



>> Roberto Clemente

photo: Shutterstock.com

"I AM CONVINCED THAT GOD WANTED ME TO BE A BASEBALL PLAYER. I WAS BORN TO PLAY BASEBALL."

- ROBERTO CLEMENTE

Pappy Van Winkle's Family Reserve

BARREL FERMENTED CIGARS
BY DREW ESTATE



AVAILABLE ONLINE EXCLUSIVELY AT
WWW.PAPPYCO.COM



THE STORY OF THESE HISTORIC BOURBON-BARREL-FERMENTED CIGARS STARTS, WHERE ELSE, BUT IN KENTUCKY, USA AND FEATURES KENTUCKY SEED AND KENTUCKY GROWN TOBACCO. ONCE GROWN, THE TOBACCO LEAVES ARE HARVESTED AND CAREFULLY SELECTED FOR TRADITIONAL KENTUCKY STYLE FIRE CURING. WE THEN TRANSPORT THE LEAVES, USED AS THE WRAPPER, FROM HOPKINSVILLE, KENTUCKY TO SAINT JAMES PARISH, LOUISIANA. THIS IS WHERE THE TOBACCO UNDERGOES BARREL FERMENTATION.

THE PAPPY VAN WINKLE BARREL FERMENTED CIGAR IS HAND CRAFTED AT LA GRAN FABRICA DREW ESTATE IN ESTELI, NICARAGUA AND FEATURES TWO WRAPPERS, "TAPA NEGRA", THE KENTUCKY GROWN, BARREL FERMENTED LEAF BLENDED OVER A MEXICAN SAN ANDRES LEAF WITH AN ALL-NICARAGUAN BLEND OF WELL AGED, ROBUST & EARTHY TOBACCOS.

SURGEON GENERAL WARNING: Cigars Are Not A Safe Alternative To Cigarettes.



AVAILABLE AT YOUR LOCAL DREW DIPLOMAT RETAILER
DREW ESTATE | THE REBIRTH OF CIGARS
WWW.DREWESTATE.COM #DE4L

