



Umpire, Santiago de Cuba, 2015

Ira Block is an internationally renowned photojournalist, teacher, and workshop leader who has produced over 30 stories for the National Geographic Magazine and its affiliates. He began his career as a newspaper photographer, a position which earned him numerous press club awards. His best-known published work to date is the substantial book, *Saving America's Treasures* – a collaborative effort between the Clinton White House, the National Geographic Society, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Later, his photographic project *Faces of Hope*, featuring photographs of survivors and objects retrieved in the aftermath of the World Trade Center tragedy, became part of the permanent collection of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum. In the current exhibition Ira Block has captured the extraordinary relationship between the Cuban people and their national sport. His photos are a visual tribute to their culture.

The exhibition was made possible by the generous support of the Kunis Foundation. Special thanks goes to Gary Kunis '73 and to the *Instituto Nacional de Deportes, Educación Física y Recreación*, the Cuban ministry of sports.

Binghamton University Art Museum  
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# *Baseball in Cuba*

A Photographic Essay  
by Ira Block

September 8 - December 17, 2016

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Binghamton University Art Museum

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Eduardo - Veterano, 2015





# Baseball in Cuba

*Rise up against the onslaught of a cruel offensive or stay trapped in a game of strikeouts. Could it be that baseball resembles life? Is it possible that without it, we could not dream?*

Buena Fé, Cuba's Latin pop band

Baseball permeates Cuban culture and identity. Popular song lyrics, such as those above, are infused with baseball metaphors; animated conversations about *pelota* can be overheard any time at Havana cafes and parks; thousands drink sweet Cuban coffee while attending baseball games held in stadiums designed to hold from 300 to 55,000. Baseball is in the blood of the Cuban people.

How did a sport originating in the United States, the much demonized enemy of Castro's Cuba, become the obsession of the inhabitants of this Caribbean island nation? The answer lies in Cuba's colonial past. By the nineteenth century, Spain had colonized the island for several hundred years. Cuba's elites, bristling at the increasingly oppressive Spanish rule, began sending their sons to the United States to be educated in Catholic universities and colleges like Georgetown and St. John's in order to escape Spanish influence. Some, like Esteban Bellán, returned after the American Civil War with knowledge of the game, and shared their passion and expertise with their fellow Cubans. Bellán helped found the island's first baseball club, which helped launch the sport as Cuba's national game. By 1878, the Cuban League had been organized, just two years after the National League was founded in the United States. Baseball took hold quickly in Cuba, especially among nationalist sympathizers because it was seen as antithetical to the values and institutions of the Spanish imperial power. For Cubans, baseball became associated with freedom and resistance, in contrast to bullfighting, the Spanish sport that was increasingly linked to tyrannical imperial rule and considered retrograde and inhumane. In fact, baseball became a significant source of contention between colony and metropole. Spain attempted to abolish baseball for being an "anti-Spanish game conducive to uprisings." Spain also grew alarmed that baseball, through competitions and tours, was facilitating warm relations between the United States and Cuba. Thus, baseball has always been an



Top: Blue Wall Practice, 2015

Bottom: Street baseball, Trinidad, 2014

important component of Cuban national identity.

Following Cuban independence, and freed from Spanish efforts to check the expansion of baseball, the sport's popularity exploded. After 1898, Cuban players dotted the rosters of American teams and play between Cuban and U.S. teams increased. Cuba became a regular winter stop for American teams and players. A few teams held spring training on the island. Jackie Robinson worked out there in 1947 before his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, contributing to Cubans' fondness for Robinson. This affection was displayed in March 2016 when President Barack Obama brought with him Robinson's widow and daughter as guests on his historic trip.

The political instability of Cuba and the revolution that installed Fidel Castro as dictator effectively ended baseball relations between the island nation and the U.S. when the borders between the two closed. The U.S. economic embargo of Cuba ended the shipment of baseball equipment there, and the flow of Cuban ball players to Major League Baseball fell to a trickle. But Castro, himself a fan of the game, sought not to ban America's pastime in Cuba; he instead reshaped it to reflect communist goals and values. Banning professional sports altogether, Castro reorganized baseball into amateur leagues that reflected a socialist model, driven by nationalist and ideological ideals, not profit. Baseball thus continued to be associated with Cuban nationalism and identity.

Today, the Cuban landscape betrays the consequences of decades-long scarcity, isolation, and economic malaise. And yet against this backdrop, baseball continues to ignite the passions of the Cuban people. Fans attend games in spartan venues located in desolate rural areas and in urban settings where the stadiums, hardly modern by American standards, accommodate crowds in the thousands. Aging structures with concrete bench seating, wooden edifices, and peeling paint, dot the island. Palmar de Junco, located about seventy miles west of Havana, is the site of the first recorded organized baseball game in Cuba in 1874 and continues to function as a provincial baseball academy for young boys. By contrast, El Estadio Latinoamericano, the largest baseball stadium in Havana, can hold crowds of over 50,000 who come to watch the city's two teams, the Industriales and the Metropolitanos. Outside the stadium, a large billboard encapsulates the longstanding relationship between baseball and Cuban nationalism. Castro's words are emblazoned between two iconic symbols of Cuba, a baseball and the Cuban flag: *El triunfo estará en la suma del esfuerzo del todos*. In English, "Triumph is the sum of all our struggles."

But Cubans don't need to be engaged in organized baseball competitions to satisfy their insatiable hunger for the sport. Anywhere you go in Cuba you will find pick-up games being played in alleys and streets, in deserted lots, in fallowed fields, even inside the clover leaf of an on-ramp to a highway. Lone children can be seen batting a ball up against a building. Children play in bare feet and without shirts. Most lack even the most rudimentary equipment. Undeterred, rolled up masking tape frequently serves as an ersatz ball.

Of baseball and its storied place in the hearts of Cubans, someone once said, it is not a matter of life and death. It is much more important.

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