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 passion 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 focused on 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.

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*Baseball in Cuba*

A Photographic Essay

by Ira Block

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Binghamton University Art Museum

Binghamton University

Binghamton, NY 13902

Binghamton.edu/art-museum

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Baseball in Cuba

Baseball permeates Cuban culture and identity. Popular song lyrics, such as those above, are infused with baseball metaphors; animated conversations about palets can be overhead 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 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, and baseball relations between the island nation and the U.S. were on the rise.

In 1874, the Cubans played their first professional baseball game with the New York Monticello Athletic Club in Havana, who traveled to Cuba with a few professional players. Cuba won the game 17-0. By 1880, two clubs were playing in Havana. The following year, the Cuban League was formed, and baseball continued to grow in Cuba. By 1890, there were 15 baseball teams in Havana.

Baseball became an 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 1899, 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. The 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 baseball 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 realigned it to reflect communal goals and values. Running 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, heavily modern by American standards, accommodate crowds in the thousands. Aging structures with concrete bench seating, wooden sidewalks, and peeling paint dot the island. Palmier 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: the baseball and the Cuban flag.

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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