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1982  
by Lionel Martin

havana, sept 1, reuter -- cuba's impassioned baseball fans are engaged in a heated debate on why their national baseball nine have fallen on hard times and on whether cuba was right in withdrawing its team from contention in the world amateur baseball championship that begins next week in seoul, south korea.

the reason given for the withdrawal is that the cuban team is not playing up to standard. it lost to panama, 2-1, and to puerto rico, 3-1, in the central american and caribbean games here last month.

at another major international competition in march, 1981, it lost to a young u.s. team in the finals of the intercontinental cup playoffs in edmonton, canada.

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although cuba won silver medals at the central american games and at edmonton, a groundswell of grassroots criticism arose about how the team was being managed.

over the past decade, cuba's national baseball team has been the pride of the nation. they have won 16 of the last 26 world amateur baseball titles and most other international contests they have competed in.

in explaining the reasons for pulling the cuban team out of the world amateur title competition this year, galvan vila, president of the cuban sports institute said +it would be preferable not to attend than to end up in third or fourth place.+  
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many cuban fans are not in agreement with that decision. at the pelota (baseball) cafeteria, known as +the hot corner+ on 23rd street and 12th in havana, baseball fans argue about what's right and wrong late into the night.

+why shouldn't we go to korea and play,+ argues juan sanchez. and adds, +if we lose, we lose, and maybe next year we will come back and win.+

+we have our prestige, and besides, the team doesn't deserve to go,+ cries jaime rodriguez. +we are in a crisis,+ federico otero asserts. armando, a well-known havana baseball fanatic, doesn't see what all the shouting is about. +we are not in crisis. we still have great ball players and we could pick a winning team right now,+ he says.  
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recognising the spirit of rebellion that has arisen around the decision not to send a team to seoul, hector rodríguez, a nationally known sports announcer says: +it is up to us, the press, radio and television to convince the people that the sports institute did the right thing.+

the decision is upheld by trabajadores, the newspaper of the trade union movement. it writes that +what irritates fans is to play badly, without the spirit of champions, or with a team manager that makes all sorts of mistakes.+

the target of the fans' ire is servio borges, the manager of the national baseball team. on the hot corner the cuban equivalent of +he's a bum+ is heard over and over again.

the multitude of mini-meetings argue the fina points of baseball --whether borges should have started with a certain young pitcher, or whether he should have had a pinch-hitter bunt at a crucial moment.

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few cubans believe that borges can withstand the storm of criticism and the odds are that he will be replaced soon.

the cuban sports institute has undertaken an +agonising appraisal+ of what's wrong with cuban baseball.

bobby salamanca, cuba's best known baseball announcer says: +it's time for the cuban team to take a protective count of ten while things are being analysed.+

aside from bad decisions made by the manager, the difficult conditions of the long playing season are often given as a reason for the team's lacklustre performances.

one sports announcer tallied up the hours of travelling by bus by the oriente team in two months and came out with 22,000 kilometres on the highway.

the heat, mediocre accomodations and other hardships add up to the fact that players that make up the national team are weary by the time international competitions come around.

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another frequently heard reason for poor performances is the loss of good baseball players through strict disciplinary measures. several months ago five of cuba's best ball players from the champion pinar del rio team, three pitchers, a second baseman and a centre fielder, were suspended for showing up late for training sessions, and were unable to play in the central american and caribbean games' championship.

Last march 17 of cuba's top baseball players and coaches were suspended permanently from organised sports after police +discovered a network of bankers, book middlemen who, through corrupt, ignoble and immoral conduct, gained rewarding profits.+

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another major complaint is that not enough attention is being given to children's Little League baseball. in an international children's baseball competition earlier this year the cuban nine performed dismally.

juan ealo, coach of the cuban national juvenile team, believes that the use of the aluminum bat has led to everyone's wanting to hit a homerun and to the loss of traditional baseball knowhow. +we have to recover the old dynamism, the batting and running strategy, including base stealing and bunting,+ ealo said.

--reuter lem/syl