

UU LEN NYK BAS
MIS: CUBA-BASEBALL

CUBAN BASEBALL SEASON GET UNDERWAY

BY LIONEL MARTIN

HAVANA, NOV 3, REUTER - THE WORLD SERIES IS OVER IN THE UNITED STATES BUT HERE IN CUBA IT WAS +A JUGAR+ (PLAY BALL) AS THE ISLAND'S BASEBALL SEASON GOT UNDERWAY IN THIS LAND OF BASEBALL FANATICS.

FROM NOW ON UNTIL NEXT SPRING A BASEBALL GAME WILL BE TELEVISED LIVE, WITHOUT ANY COMMERCIALS, FIVE NIGHTS A WEEK AND ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON.

CUBANS WERE ECSTATIC LAST MONTH WHEN THE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE DECIDED TO MAKE BASEBALL ONE OF THE OFFICIAL SPORTS OF THE 1992 SUMMER OLYMPICS. RIGHT NOW THE CUBAN NATIONAL BASEBALL TEAMS ARE THE WORLD AMATEUR BASEBALL CHAMPIONS, THE WORLD +JUNIOR+ BASEBALL CHAMPIONS (16 TO 18 YEARS OF AGE) AND THE WORLD +LITTLE LEAGUE+ CHAMPIONS (12 YEARS OLD). OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS CUBAN TEAMS HAVE WON TWENTY WORLD AMATEUR BASEBALL TITLES.

NOW THE CUBANS MAKE NO SECRET THAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO BE THE FIRST OLYMPIC BASEBALL CHAMPIONS.

BEFORE THE TRIUMPH OF THE REVOLUTION IN 1958 CUBAN FANS FOLLOWED U.S. BASEBALL AS ASSIDUOUSLY AS FANS IN NEW YORK OR BOSTON. THE HAVANA SUGAR KINGS PLAYED IN THE TRIPLE +A+ INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE AND MANY AMERICAN BALLPLAYERS CAME TO PLAY WINTER BASEBALL IN CUBA.

ALL THAT HAS CHANGED, HOWEVER, AS DIRECT CONSEQUENCE OF THE REUPTURE OF DIPLOMATIC AND TRADE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CUBA A QUARTER OF A CENTURY AGO, THE U.S. MAJOR LEAGUE TEAMS HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN HERE. IN FACT, THE OLD TIMES ONLY REMEMBER THE TIME WHEN THERE WERE TWO LEAGUES WITH EIGHT TEAMS EACH. THERE IS NO MENTION OF U.S. BASEBALL IN THE PRESS HERE. ONE CUBAN SPORTSWRITER SAID: +NINETY-NINE PER CENT OF THE CUBANS WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO TELL YOU THAT THE METS BEAT BOSTON IN THE WORLD SERIES, AND WHAT IS MORE, THEY DON'T MISS NOT KNOWING.+

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THE SPORTSWRITER EXPLAINED THAT THEY DON'T LOOK TOWARD THE UNITED STATES BECAUSE THEY NOW HAVE THEIR OWN FAVORITE LOCAL TEAMS, THEIR SUPERSTARS AND A LONG BASEBALL SEASON THAT SATISFIES THEIR FANATICAL LOVE OF THE SPORT

THERE ARE EIGHTEEN TEAMS: NINE IN THE EASTERN DIVISION AND NINE IN THE WESTERN DIVISION AND ALTHOUGH THE PLAYERS ARE OFFICIALLY AMATEURS, THE PLAY IS OF PROFESSIONAL QUALITY. SOME VETERANS HAVE PLAYED TEN, FIFTEEN AND EVEN TWENTY SEASONS! DURING A VISIT TO HAVANA IN 1977, WHITEY FORD, THE FORMER ACE PITCHER OF THE NEW YORK YANKEES COMMENTED THAT MANY OF THE CUBAN PLAYERS HE WATCHED COULD MAKE IT IN THE MAJOR LEAGUES.

THE LOCAL TEAMS ARE SUPPORTED FINANCIALLY BY THE REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE PLAYERS CHOSEN TO BE ON THESE TEAMS OR ON THE HIGHLY SELECTIVE CUBAN NATIONAL TEAM ARE GIVEN TIME OFF, FOR MONTHS, TO PLAY BASEBALL. THE PLAYERS CONTINUE TO DRAW THE SAME WAGES FROM THEIR USUAL WORK CENTERS AND DURING OFF SEASON GO BACK TO THE FARM, FACTORY OR SHOP. ONE SPORTS OFFICIAL ESTIMATED THAT NO PLAYER EARNS MORE THAN FIFTEEN HUNDRED DOLLARS FOR THE ENTIRE SEASON. THE UMPIRES (ARBITROS) WHO HAVE THE SKILL TO OFFICIATE

IN A MAJOR LEAGUE GAME, EARN ABOUT THIRTY DOLLARS FOR EACH GAME.

ADMISSION TO ALL GAMES IS FREE OF CHARGE IN KEEPING WITH THE SLOGAN OF THE CUBAN SPORTS' INSTITUTE: +SPORTS IS A RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE. (DEPORTE ES UN DERECHO DEL PUEBLO).

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THE CUBAN NATIONAL BASEBALL COMMISSIONER EARNS ABOUT FOUR HUNDRED DOLLARS A MONTH. SINCE THERE ARE NO PRIVATE CLUB OWNERS, HE IS APPOINTED BY THE NATIONAL SPORTS INSTITUTE AND IS A GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE. AS IN THE UNITED STATES, THE BASEBALL COMMISSION CAN PUNISH PLAYERS FOR MISDOINGS AND THIS YEAR, BEFORE THE SEASON BEGAN, IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT SOME DOZEN PLAYERS HAS BEEN SUSPENDED, A FEW FOR UP TO A YEAR, FOR INFRACTIONS OF RULES OR MISCONDUCT (INDICIPLINA).

THE 1986-7 SEASON WHICH JUST BEGAN AT THE LATIN-AMERICAN STADIUM IN HAVANA WITH A SEATING CAPACITY OF 55,000, KICKED OFF A CAMPAIGN IN WHICH EACH TEAM WILL PLAY FORTY EIGHT GAMES. THIS IS FOLLOWED BY A SECOND STAGE IN WHICH THE BEST PLAYERS OF THE EIGHTEEN TEAMS ARE CHOSEN TO MAKE UP EIGHT REGIONAL TEAMS WHICH ^{PLAY} SIXTY-THREE GAMES EACH.

THE BEST FOUR TEAMS TAKE PART IN THE CUBAN EQUIVILANT OF THE WORLD SERIES DURING WHICH ENTHUSIASM RISES TO CRESCENDO PROPORTIONS.

CUBA HAS CONTRIBUTED RENOWNED PLAYERS TO THE MAJOR LEAGUES IN THE UNITED STATES SUCH AS LUIS TIAH, PETE CAMPANERIS, MINNIE MINOSO, TONY OLIVA AND OTHERS. BUT THE BASEBALL HEROES IN CUBA TODAY ARE NOT MAJOR LEAGUE STARS BUT THOSE WHO PLAY IN THE CUBAN LEAGUES AND WHO ARE TOTALLY UNKNOWN IN THE UNITED STATES. AMONG THESE SUPERSTARS ARE ANTONIO MUNOZ, A THIRTY EIGHT YEAR OLD FIRST BASEMAN WHO HAS HIT 300 HOME RUNS AND HAS BELLOUED 1000 RUNS BATTED IN, AGUSTIN MARQUETI, A FORTY ONE YEAR OLD FIRST BASEMAN WITH TWENTY-ONE YEARS OF LEAGUE PLAY AND AN AVERAGE OF WELL OVER .300 AND SUCH PITCHERS AS RAFAEL VIVIENT WITH MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED VICTORIES CHALKED UP DURING HIS CAREER.

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