RR-88-72 1988 RTR 1

UU ISA LEN BAS YPC
¡CUBA-BASEBALL (SPORTS FEATURE)
'CUBANS CUT OFF FROM U.S. BASEBALL BUT WILD ABOUT THEIR OWN:
BY LIONEL MARTIN
HAVANA, MAY 16, REUTER - WHILE BASEBALL TEAMS OF THE MAJOR LEAGUES IN THE UNITED STATES GET INTO HIGH GEAR WITH MONTHS OF PLAY AHEAD, CUBA'S FANATICAL FANS ARE STILL BUZZING OVER THE TIGHT RACE FOR THEIR OWN BASEBALL CHAMPIONSHIP WHICH WAS DECIDED ON MAY 5, THE LAST DAY OF SEASON PLAY.
MILLIONS OF CUBANS ON THIS ISLAND OF TEN MILLION SAT GLUED TO THEIR TELEVISION SETS AS THE PROGRAM SWITCHED BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN THE TWO GAMES THAT WOULD DECIDE THE CHAMPIONSHIP.
THE HARD FACT IS THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF CUBANS, OLD AND YOUNG, FOLLOW THEIR OWN BASEBALL LEAGUES WITH WILD ENTHUSIASM BUT HAVE NO IDEA OF WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE BIG LEAGUES IN THE U.S.
BEFORE THE TRIUMPH OF THE REVOLUTION IN 1959, CUBAN FANS FOLLOWED U.S. BASEBALL AS ASSIDUOUSLY AS FANS IN NEW YORK OR OAKLAND. THE HAVANA SUGAR KINGS PLAYED IN THE TRIPLE +A+ INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE AND MANY U.S. BALLPLAYERS CAME TO PLAY WINTER BALL IN CUBA.
HOWEVER, FOR THE PAST TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS, SINCE THE U.S. BROKE DIPLOMATIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS WITH CUBA, HARDLY A WORD HAS BEEN MENTIONED ON CUBAN RADIO OR TELEVISION OR IN NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES ABOUT PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL IN THE UNITED STATES.
ASK THE AVERAGE CUBAN BASEBALL FAN WHO WAS THE WINNER OF LAST YEAR'S WORLD SERIES AND HE WILL STARE AT YOU BLANKLY. NOR IS HE AWARE THAT CUBAN EXILES, SUCH AS JOSE CONSECO OF THE OAKLAND A'S OR RAFAEL PALMEIRO OF THE CHICAGO CUBS ARE AMONG THIS YEAR'S CROP OF BIG LEAGUE STARS.
OVER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY, CUT OFF FROM THE UNITED STATES, CUBA HAS DEVELOPED ITS OWN LEAGUES, BASEBALL GREATS AND TRADITIONS. CUBAN KIDS DON'T KNOW WHO REGGIE JACKSON IS, EVEN THOUGH HIS MOTHER WAS CUBAN BORN, BUT THEIR EYES LIGHT UP WHEN YOU MENTION MATANZAS OUTFIELDER WILFREDO SANCHEZ, SEVEN-TIME NATIONAL BATTING CHAMP WHO RETIRED IN 1985. ANY ONE OF THEM CAN TELL YOU ALL ABOUT PITCHER ROGELIO VINENT WHO HAD 226 VICTORIRES TO HIS CREDIT WHEN HE RETIRED EARLIER THIS YEAR OR THE HAVANA SLUGGER, ANTONIO MUNOZ, WHO HAS MORE RUNS BATTED IN AND HOMERUNS THAN ANY OTHER CUBAN BALL PLAYER.
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BASEBALL WAS INTRODUCED INTO CUBA OVER A HUNDRED YEARS AGO BY SOME U.S SAILORS WHOSE MERCHANT SHIP VISITED THE PORT OF MATANZAS TO THE EAST OF HAVANA. IT BECAME AS MUCH THE NATIONAL SPORT AS IT DID IN THE UNITED STATES AND KIDS PLAYING BASEBALL CAN BEEN SEEN ON THE STREETS AND SANDLOTS AND IN THE FIELDS ALL OVER CUBA. +CUBAN BOYS ARE BORN WITH A BASEBALL GLOVE ON THEIR HAND:+ A VETERAN CUBAN SPORTS WRITER COMMENTED.

WHEN PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL WAS OUTLAWED IN THE EARLY SIXTIES, THE GOVERNMENT TOOK OVER THE JOB FOSTERING TEAMS AND LEAGUES THAT WOULD WIN THE HEARTS AND ALLEGIANCE OF BASEBALL FANS. TODAY, THE GAME IS COORDINATED THROUGH A BASEBALL COMMISSIONER WHO OPERATES OUT OF CUBA'S NATIONAL SPORTS' INSTITUTE IN HAVANA.

CUBA'S FOURTEEN PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS, WHICH ARE THE OWNERS OF THE BALL CLUBS HERE ON THIS CARIBBEAN ISLAND, HAVE BUILT A BASEBALL INFRASTRUCTURE WITH STADIUMS AND RESOURCES WHICH VYE WITH THOSE OF THE UNITED STATES.

THERE ARE FIFTY STADIUMS IN CUBA WHERE NIGHT BASEBALL CAN BE PLAYED. THE BIGGEST STADIUMS WHERE THE BEST TEAMS PLAY HAVE A SEATING CAPACITY OF FROM 30,000 TO 55,000, MODERN SCOREBOARDS AND EXCELLENTLY MAINTAINED DIAMONDS AND OUTFIELDS. HOMERUNS ARE NOT CHEAP SINCE THE MAJOR STADIUMS MEASURE ABOUT 330 FEET FROM HOME PLATE TO THE LEFT OR RIGHT FIELD FENCES AND OVER 400 FEET TO THE CENTER FIELD FENCE.

ADMISSION TO ALL CUBAN SPORTS EVENTS, INCLUDING BASEBALL GAMES, IS FREE OF CHARGE. BUT THE AVERAGE CUBA PREFERS TO SLOUCH IN AN ARMCHAIR AT HOME AND WATCH THE GAMES ON TELEVISION. DURING THE SEASON, AN AVERAGE OF ONE GAME IS TELEVISED NIGHTLY.

CUBAN BASEBALL PLAYERS ARE OFFICIALLY AMATEURS. THEIR MONTHLY PAY COMES NOT FROM THE BALL CLUB BUT FROM THEIR REGULAR WORK CENTERS WHICH GIVE THEM THE TIME OFF, SOMETIMES SEVEN MONTHS, TO TAKE PART IN CUBA'S NATIONAL PASTIME. A CUBAN SPORTS OFFICIAL ESTIMATED THAT THE AVERAGE MONTHLY WAGE OF A REGULAR LEAGUE BASEBALL PLAYERS IS ABOUT 250 PESOS (SOMEWHAT OVER 300 DOLLARS) A MONTH. WHEN THE BASEBALL SEASON IS OVER, THE PLAYERS GO BACK TO THEIR REGULAR JOBS, NO RICHER BUT CERTAINLY MORE FAMOUS.

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THE +SELECTIVE SERIES+ WHICH ENDED ON MAY 5: WITH ITS DOWN TO THE WIRE FINISH, HAVE EIGHT TEAMS FROM DIFFERENT PARTS OF CUBA COMPETING. EACH TEAM PLAYS SIXTY-THREE GAMES DURING THE +SELECTIVE SERIES+ WHICH BEGINS IN LATE FEBRUARY.

THE +SELECTIVE SERIES+ IS ONLY PART OF THE BASEBALL SEASON IN CUBA, HOWEVER, THE SEASON ACTUALLY BEGINS IN NOVEMBER WITH THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP (CAMPIONATO NACIONAL) WHICH HAS AN EASTERN AND WESTERN DIVISION. EACH DIVISION HAS NINE TEAMS: EACH OF WHICH PLAYS 48 GAMES.

IN EARLY FEBRUARY, THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP ENDS WITH A FOUR TEAM PLAYOFF, TWO TEAMS FROM THE WESTERN AND TWO FROM THE EASTERN DIVISION. THE WINNER IS CROWNED CHAMP.

WHEN THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP IS FINISHED, THE BEST PLAYERS OF THE EIGHTEEN TEAMS ARE CHOSEN TO MAKE UP THE EIGHT TEAMS OF THE +SELECTIVE SERIES.+

THE TOP PLAYERS IN CUBA, THOSE WHO TAKE PART IN THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP AND THE +SELECTIVE SERIES+ CAN PLAY IN 111 GAMES. LAST YEAR, ORESTES KINDELAN OF THE +SERRANOS+ OF EASTERN CUBA, WHO PLAYED IN THE 111 GAMES PLUS 6 PLAYOFF GAMES HIT FIFTY-ONE HOMERUNS, A RECORD WHICH WOULD HAVE PUT HIM AMONG THE BEST IN THE UNITED STATES OR JAPAN.

OVER THE YEARS, CUBAN TEAMS HAVE RACKED UP AN ASTOUNDING NUMBER OF TRIUMPHS IN INTERNATIONAL AMATEUR BASEBALL COMPETITION. THEY HAVE NOT LOST AN INTERNATIONAL WORLD AMATEUR BASEBALL CHAMPIONSHIP IN WHICH THEY HAVE PARTICIPATED SINCE 1961 (THEY DID NOT TAKE PART IN THE CHAMPIONSHIPS IN COLOMBMIA IN 1965 AND IN SOUTH KOREA IN 1982) IN INTERCONTINENTAL CUP COMPETITION, AFTER LOSING TO A YOUNG U.S. SQUAD IN 1981, THEY TOOK THE LAST THREE CHAMPIONSHIPS. CUBANS HAVE ALSO BEEN BASEBALL CHAMPS OF THE LAST FIVE PANAMERICAN GAMES.
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WHEN THE FORMER NEW YORK YANKEE ACE PITCHER, WHITEY FORD, WAS IN CUBA IN 1977, HE COMMENTED THAT MANY OF THE PLAYERS HE WATCHED WERE OF MAJOR LEAGUE CALIBER. CRITICS CLAIMS THAT THE FACT THAT THESE BALLPALYERS, IN THE ABSENCE OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL, REMAIN AMATEURS DURING THEIR CAREERS, IS ONE OF THE SECRETS OF CUBA'S OUTSTANDING SUCCESS IN INTERNATIONAL AMATEUR COMPETITION. CUBAN OFFICIALS REPLY THAT BALLPLAYERS ON THE ISLAND MEET THE DEFINITION OF AMATEUR BECAUSE THEY RECEIVE NO EXTRA REMUNERATION FOR PLAYING.

CUBAN PLAYERS AND FANS ARE GENERALLY WELL BEHAVED: A FAR CRY FROM THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY TIMES WHEN BRAWLS AND BOTTLE-THROWING WERE FREQUENT EVENTS.

HOWEVER, CUBAN BASEBALL, DESPITE ITS HIGH LEVEL AMATEUR BASEBALL ETHIC HAS HAD ITS SCANDELS. THE MOST SERIOUS WAS IN 1982 WHEN SEVENTEEN OF THE ISLAND'S TOP PLAYERS AND COACHES WERE