

Fidel and baseball



It was hard times, in January of 1962. The Revolution was struggling against internal and external enemies who threatened its very existence. The Cuban people defeated one attempt after another to return the country to the past, under the undisputed leadership of Fidel Castro Ruz.

Amidst so many responsibilities as head of the nation, Fidel always found a few moments to devote to sports, which had already begun a transformation the previous year, to become an activity enjoyed by the people on a massive scale.

The principal figure in this process was precisely the Comandante en Jefe, who on a Sunday afternoon, January 14, 1962, took the field as the first batter in the inaugural game of the First National Series of Baseball, in the recently renamed Latinoamericano Stadium, with thousands of fans cheering.

This appearance on the diamond was nothing new for Fidel. Since his boyhood, he had played baseball, initially on a team at the Cuqui Bosch Pre-university Institute in Santiago de Cuba, where he studied 1939-1940, before moving to Havana, according to the school's archives (Volume 7, number 242), and later at the University of Havana, where he also played basketball, another sport he was passionate about.

Whenever his many tasks leading the country permitted, he played baseball or basketball. For example, according to the Camagüey newspaper *Adelante*, in its issue dated July 7, 1964 (recalled in *El Guerrillero*, February 6, this year), Fidel participated in a friendly game on July 5th, between Camagüey and Pinar del Río, during a break in the National Juvenile Championship, underway there at the time. He pitched for the team from Camagüey that went on to win the match-up.

A few months earlier, in April of 1964 - as recalled in *El Artemiseño* this past August 14 - Fidel was

traveling along the Central Highway in the direction of Pinar del Río, when he stopped at a baseball field along the road. Teams from

Santa Cruz de los Pinos and San Cristóbal were playing, and "The story goes that he proved to be not only an enthusiastic fan, but pitched three innings for both of the teams," the newspaper reports.

FIDEL NEVER STRIKES OUT

This phrase was popularized by the late Venezuelan President Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, during a television appearance. Talking about his years as a ball player - he was an effective left-handed pitcher - Chávez said, "Do you remember that strike-out I handed Fidel over there in Barquisimeto?"

He immediately corrected himself, saying, "That wasn't a strike, because Fidel never strikes out."

This is the anecdote: Chávez threw a questionable pitch that the umpire called as a strike, engendering Fidel's disagreement since the count stood at three balls, two strikes. Far from returning to the bench, Fidel went straight to first base, adding some humor to the game.

This statement is key to the book written by Villa Clara journalist Osvaldo Rojas Garay, who in 320 entertaining pages recounts the history of revolutionary baseball through the figure of Fidel. This approach was possible because few heads of state have shown as much interest in baseball as he did, to celebrate the victories and suffer bitter defeats. He was always present, be it at bat or throwing strikes.

When the passage of time prevented him from playing, Fidel attended international competitions held in Cuba. Fans at the Latino stadium saw him during the Intercontinental Cup of 1979, and awarding Cuba the trophy during the World Championship in 1984.

He was regularly on hand to greet victorious teams returning from events abroad. Among the most memorable of these was his presence to receive the team coming home from the Dominican Republic after a well-played World tournament, when he christened Gaspar "Curro" Pérez as the hero of Quisqueya, as well as the next year, when he called José Antonio Huelga the hero of Cartagena.

Fidel enjoyed the two games played by the Cuban national team against the Baltimore Orioles from the U.S. Major League, and upon their return gave a moving speech on the University of Havana's Grand Stairway, May 4, 1999, presenting a dissertation on the different tactics used in the games, explaining how team members were selected, and praising the respect for the players shown by fans in both Havana and Baltimore.

Seven years later, in March of 2006, the Cuban team traveled to Puerto Rico to participate in the First World Classic, an event organized by the Major Leagues in which many star players participated.

Fidel stayed abreast of all the details, from conversations with U.S. authorities to resolve multiple organizational problems, to a two-hour meeting with the 30 players before their departure, during which he asked about the team's composition and training; characteristics of opponents; the closed stadiums and artificial turf; as well as the tournament schedule and television broadcasts.

He then followed every one of the games, minute by minute. When the first two rounds of the series were completed, the Comandante en Jefe sent a message congratulating the team for the work done to qualify for the semi-finals. Later, after losing to Japan to finish second, a massive reception was organized for the team in Havana's Ciudad Deportiva Coliseum, March 21, during which Fidel said, "You struggled with your heads held high until the end. The people are proud of you for the quality of play you showed, in a competition that was established when baseball was excluded from the Olympic Games."

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Like a good Cuban, Fidel was passionate about baseball. He was concerned about the players' health and personal problems, as the testimony of many makes clear, above all in difficult situations. He was always a man of baseball.

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