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BASEBALL AND SOCIETY IN THE CARIBBEAN

The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic. Rob Ruck. Westport CT: Meckler, 1991. x + 205 pp. (Cloth n.p.)

Trading with the Enemy: A Yankee Travels Through Castro's Cuba. Tom Miller. New York: Atheneum, 1992. x + 338 pp. (Cloth US\$ 24.00)

Read Bart Giamatti's *Take Time for Paradise* (1989) or any of the other grand old game sentimentalists and you'll discover that baseball somehow perfectly reflects the temperament of U.S. culture. This match, in turn, accounts for baseball's enduring and penetrating popularity in the United States. Read Ruck and Miller and you'll learn that baseball is more popular and culturally dominant in the Dominican Republic and Cuba than it is to the north. The suppressed syllogism affirms that U.S. and Caribbean cultures hold intimate similarities. If that is true, this Caribbeanist has been out to lunch; then again, no one ever accused economists of having acute cultural sensibilities.

Decomposing the syllogism, the flaw comes with the sentimentalists, not with Ruck and Miller. *The Tropic of Baseball* and *Trading with the Enemy* are two entertaining and interesting accounts of Caribbean culture.

Ruck does a magnificent job in portraying the integration of baseball in Dominican life. Part of Ruck's method is to alternate his narrative between baseball and Dominican history, making the two appear to evolve interactively. The dominant role of the United States in Dominican history since 1870, when the U.S. Senate came within a few votes of annexing the Dominican Republic as a state, is an important theme in Ruck's treatment. It was, after all, occupying U.S. marines at the beginning of the twentieth century who introduced the game to the Dominicans. One of Ruck's main oral his-

tory informants, Pedro Julio Santana, a 76-year-old literary executive, explains that the typical Dominican has a love/hate relationship with the United States. On the one hand, Dominicans resent the imperialist role the United States has played in its internal affairs, but, on the other, they are grateful for the gift of baseball. It is common, he says, for a Dominican to be a fan of both Augusto César Sandino and the New York Yankees. "They have not given us anything else that, in my opinion, is of any value but baseball. And here, baseball is the king."

Baseball is not only woven into Dominican history, it is also woven into Dominican Republic communities. Ruck writes about two of the Dominican Republic's teams (p. 12):

Licey and *Escogido* were not distant institutions, isolated by the megabucks of contemporary sport or distanced by television. They were close at hand, the teams' directors identifiable, and the players men with whom many rubbed shoulders in the course of a day in the tropics. More than mere ball clubs, these social institutions linked families, athletes, and fans in a lifelong sporting fraternity. And the rivalry, rather than crystallizing splits within the republic along the lines of class or color, actually allowed the Dominicans to transcend these differences and join together in a larger sense of community. That has prevailed across the generations and even through the dark years of the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo into the 1980s.

The first Dominican national championship was played in 1921. At the time the capital, Santo Domingo, had a population of a bit above 30,000 and the championship series drew over 20,000 in attendance. That would be like a World Series in Yankee Stadium drawing six million people to the ballpark over four games. The 1921 championship brought each team a total of \$2,000. During the 1920s the game in the Dominican Republic became increasingly professionalized, as players, though not formally paid a salary until 1929, were paid covertly through phantom jobs and perquisites.

By the middle of 1930, Dominican strongman General Rafael Trujillo had risen to power. Though he was said to prefer horses and women to baseball, members of his family were devout baseball fans and became very involved in the game. On his son's behalf, Trujillo arranged for two teams to merge to form one dominant team, named *Ciudad Trujillo*, which he further stocked by buying stars from the U.S. Negro Leagues. Two Hall-of-Famers, Josh Gibson and James 'Cool Papa' Bell, played for *Ciudad*. The rising cost of fielding a team and the imbalanced competition resulting from Trujillo's game plan led to the ultimate demise of the Dominican professional league in the late 1930s, not to reappear until 1951.

One force that has driven baseball's popularity through the decades has been the country's weak economy. Boys have little else to aspire to, other than one day making it to the Dominican winter league or the Major

Leagues, to take them out of their squalid, opportunity-less communities. In San Pedro de Macorís where more than one-third of the country's one hundred-plus players who have been in the Major Leagues come from, it is said that a male baby's first present is always a bat and a ball.

In recent years the Dominican winter league has run into hard times. The economic crisis has diminished the fan base as fewer people can afford an outing to the ballpark, transportation to the park is difficult, and going to night games (when blackouts are often experienced) is sometimes dangerous. Part of the waning popularity is due to the greater reluctance for Dominican major leaguers to play in the winter league. The small salaries mean nothing to them and they are more concerned about keeping free of injuries. Former participants like Tony Fernández, Juan Samuel, Pascual Pérez, Tony Peña, and Alfredo Griffin are being replaced by minor leaguers.

Ruck's account also includes vignettes of several big leaguers and their relationship to their old communities and comparisons to baseball elsewhere in the Caribbean. At one point he quotes Cuban-born Chico Fernández, who played with the Baltimore Orioles, on his thoughts on Fidel Castro (p. 69): "They've fucked everything up there. It once was a beautiful place. You could get anything you wanted – women – gambling – anything." Perhaps Chico Fernández would find Cuba in late 1993 more to his liking. He should read Tom Miller's book to learn about what most regard as a horrifying deterioration in Cuban life since 1989.

Miller spent several months travelling around Cuba in 1990 and January 1991. He then returned for a short visit in February 1992. Miller made contacts with an assortment of people from Cuba's literati and tells extended tales about what it is like to be a writer or an artist in Cuba today. He also runs into a variety of random Cubans and Cubans who tend to seek out foreigners, and tells their tale as well. He effectively sprinkles in, albeit incongruously at times, bits and pieces of Cuban politics and history (e.g., Guantánamo Bay, José Martí, the U.S. embargo, the Cuban life of Ernest Hemingway, the Bay of Pigs).

Miller's great virtue is that he is able to capture the complexity of Cuban life and of the Cuban people's feelings toward Fidel Castro and their government. No matter how materially difficult things get in Cuba, Castro seems to retain a significant degree of popularity and legitimacy. There is both good and bad in Cuba. To his credit, Miller eschews ideological characterizations and accurately portrays the contradictions of Cuban society. If he has a deficiency in this regard, it is that he doesn't reach very broadly across Cuba's social spectrum. Except fleetingly, Miller tells us little about the life of the urban or rural worker.

Miller's mosaic of Cuban culture also includes a lengthy discussion of

baseball. Cuba's baseball season begins with an eighteen-team (one team per province, plus two in Havana City and two other provinces), forty-five-game National Series. Teams play three-game series against each other; the first two games are in the provincial capital and the last is played in a remote town to assure that all have access to live games. There are two divisions, and the winners meet in a playoff. After the playoff, the eighteen teams are consolidated as the best players are selected to play in an eight-team league. Each of the eight teams play sixty-three games in the Selective Series. The best players from here are chosen to represent Cuba in international competitions. Cuban players and umpires are not professional and putatively retain full-time jobs outside baseball from which they derive all of their remuneration. Miller quotes several players as saying they play for the fun, glory, and pride of representing their province and potentially their country.

Miller relates the history of baseball in Cuba and its close relationship to the Major Leagues through the middle of the 1960 season. Apparently the first professional baseball league in Cuba was organized in 1878 (two years after its inception in the United States) by Emilio Sabourín. When Sabourín donated the profits from the league to the independence movement, the Spanish banned baseball and threw Sabourín in prison. It seems that, like much else in Cuba, baseball is a symbol of resistance.

In 1909 the American League Champions, the Detroit Tigers with their star Ty Cobb, went to Cuba for a series. The Havana Reds shellacked them. Cobb apparently was in a slump, or a *mojito*-induced stupor. Eleven years later Babe Ruth, the King of Swat, fresh from his first year with the Yankees, was paid \$40,000 for touring Cuba for several weeks with the New York Giants. Thirty years after that another king, Fidel Castro, was pitching side-arm curveballs to soon-to-be Brooklyn Dodger, Don Hoak. Miller recalls in some interesting detail what Hoak had to say about Castro's prowess on the mound. Apparently his career as a ballplayer would have been considerably shorter than his career as President. But then, this could be said about anybody's career as a ballplayer.

REFERENCE

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