

Defecting Cuba: Diplomacy, Baseball, and the Chase for Democratic Opportunity

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Abstract

International competition has been the most common venue for athletes from countries like Cuba to stage their best attempt at a getaway from their home country. Oftentimes, this is the case for many athletes who may only receive approval and an exit visa for sport related reasons. This paper provides a brief history of the defections of Cuban athletes, the United States and Cuba's complicated relationship with defected athletes, and the legal and diplomatic consequences of these athletes' actions.

Keywords: baseball, Cuba, democracy, sports, communist regime

Introduction

In 2021, a team of Cuban baseball players traveled to Mexico to compete in the U-23 World Cup. Though the team ultimately fell to Bolivia in the bronze medal match, the action continued following the final out. Twelve Cuban players decided to not return with the team back to their home country. Ultimately, this led to the largest defection of Cuban athletes in recent history. Through Cuba's state media, officials called the actions of these young men a "vile abandonment", insinuating their "weak morals and ethics" (Will Grant 2021). For Cuba, the actions by these baseball players were not only an embarrassment on the international stage, but a heavy depletion of talent from their international roster. For the players, this was their sole attempt to leave a Communist regime in order to maximize their chances of playing professionally in the United States on a Major League Baseball (MLB) team.

Cuba has a long history of defecting athletes, but recent geopolitical turmoil has reignited a practice many athletes, especially baseball players, are all too familiar with. Former presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro attempted noticeable efforts to mend diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba

in 2014 by easing trade and travel restrictions, while keeping certain elements of the economic embargo. However, the Trump administration reversed many of these policies, ultimately solidifying the contested relationship between the two nations (Trotta and Marsh). Cuban baseball players aiming to pitch, hit, and run in their sport's highest professional league were once again caught in the midst of an ideological contest with no clear end in sight. This paper will discuss a brief history as to why athletes defect, the United States and Cuba's complicated relationship with defected athletes, and the legal and diplomatic consequences of athletes' actions.

Defecting Becomes an Olympic Sport

International competition has been the most common venue for athletes to stage their best attempt at a getaway from their home country. Oftentimes, this is the case for many athletes who may only receive approval and an exit visa for sport related reasons. But also, international competitions can be sites where ideological and political regimes are put to the test to determine a winner and loser. While we know this *isn't* actually true, countries have pumped endless amounts of resources into their athletes to

ensure success on the international stage. The Olympics have served as the premier event for over a century for countries to display their finest performers as ambassadors of their respective political ideology.

Pierre de Coubertin established what would become the modern Olympics and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894 in France. From the earliest idea of the event, the Olympics were intended to bring together the world to participate in a “courteous contest” which, to de Coubertin, represented the “best form of internationalism” (Müller 301). Yet, the international olive branches were almost too fast and loose when reports of some individuals from various countries teamed up in events like men’s doubles tennis during the 1896 Olympics in Athens. By the 1908 Olympic Games in London, event organizers aimed for stricter regulations for competitors to represent their respective countries. This began to set the tone for the Olympiad to break away as a side show to the World Fairs and become an important international event. Furthermore, it began to solidify the relationship between the athletes and the country they represented on their uniform.

The years between World War I and World War II, sports became an increasingly popular form of recreation for people around the world. The significance of success, especially on an international stage, became more than just a win. It represented nationalistic pride for one’s country in a safer, healthier outlet for displaying a country’s success, as opposed to a global war of attrition. However, following WWII, it became increasingly evident that two types of ideologies would remain—a brand of liberal democracy touted by the United States of America and a highly centralized implementation of communism practiced by the Soviet Union.

As a result, countries across the world had to decide which side of the Iron Curtain they fell on. Additionally, sporting organizations were subject to this divide, as well. IOC president Avery Brundage was concerned by the development of “political blocs” in the Olympic movement. “Since the War [WWII]...we have a group of countries operating as a unit...we certainly do not want anything like the Iron Curtain dividing the IOC” (“Memorandum”). Yet, the Olympics

would indeed become the political arena Brundage aimed to avert, especially as Soviet sport officials viewed the Games as a vehicle to spread communism throughout the world (Parks 126). However, it didn’t take long for citizens to feel the political effects in their own backyard.

During the 1948 Olympics in London, Marie Provaznikova was the Czechoslovakian women’s gymnastics coach. A few months prior to the games, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia carried out a successful coup d’état which marked the beginning of (what would become) four decades of communist rule. Because of this conflict, Provaznikova cited her “lack of freedom” in Prague as her reason to become—what many consider—the first known defector from the Olympics (Daniel). Her defection marked the beginning of two important concepts. First, she introduced international sport competitions as the premier site to pull off an illegal exit from one’s home country. But more importantly, she set off a trend which would become a key aspect of the Cold War.

Cuba Comes to the Plate

As the early post-war years crept into the Cold War years, the United States kept a close eye on Cuba. Fulgencio Batista’s leadership was proving to be problematic for many Cubans, as rates of poverty increased, along with crime and vice-laden practices in the streets of Havana. The United States’ long interest in Cuban sugar kept Batista’s pockets full, but popularity amongst his countrymen low. As a result, Fidel Castro and his close comrades led a long-shot revolution which surprisingly ended with Batista fleeing to the Dominican Republic in late 1958. The overthrow of Batista’s presidential dictatorship turned Cuba into a full-fledged communist state. Subsequently, the United States imposed a series of harsh economic sanctions, including a severe trade embargo in 1960. Two years later, the Cuban Missile Crisis escalated tensions to a near nuclear brink. While no weapons of mass destruction were fired, the proxy war between the United States, the Soviet Union, and the smaller countries on their respective “sides” reached a turning point which would define the latter half of the 20th century. It was becoming

increasingly clear to citizens that they belonged to either communism or democracy.

Castro's Cuba aggressively shifted towards a centralized government. Julie Marie Bunck notes, "Fidel Castro set out to substantially change pre-revolutionary culture and to impose on Cubans different beliefs and attitudes. The regime sought to create a 'new man'—selfless and cooperative, obedient and hard-working, gender-blind and incorruptible, non-materialistic, and completely loyal" (Bunck 112). While this included attempts at incorporating literacy programs, universal healthcare, and free schooling, Castro's agenda had many repercussions. The government seized private land and facilities, which affected many citizens. Anyone who attempted to challenge the revolution was subject to interrogations, imprisonment, or even sent to labor camps. As a result, many Cubans attempted to flee this strict regime in hopes for freedom. South Florida became a popular destination for those seeking to rebuild their lives in the United States. Yet, athletes found themselves in the midst of this geopolitical crisis.

The lure of professional sporting opportunities and freedom in the United States was a soft power Americans dangled over Cubans looking for an escape from their tumultuous homeland. H. Michael Erisman acknowledges soft power as a type of influence countries use in attempts to alter behavior of certain groups to achieve a specific result. For the United States, swaying anyone away from Communism, let alone athletes, was considered a success and a task of the utmost importance during the Cold War. Yet, for Cuban officials, it was the ultimate betrayal.

The new Cuban regime encouraged participation in sports for two reasons: Body and country. In accordance with Communistic ideals, healthy bodies created physically skilled laborers. However, those same healthy bodies could perform on the international stage as "successes of the socialist Revolution" taking place in Cuba, or so Castro thought. For him, these young international athletes were the ambassadors of the new Cuban man (Bunck 112). In post-revolutionary Cuba, sports were something accessible to everyone, not just the elites, as it was during the pre-revolutionary years (Bunck 115). Castro was adamant to

remind Cubans that sports, under Batista, had "gravitated around institutions, around private clubs which were only for the powerful classes, the national bourgeoisie, those who could belong to clubs because they had money and opportunities" (*Granma Weekly Review* 1969). For Castro, sports was the perfect opportunity to create "anti-American, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist sentiments among the Cuban population" (Bunck 113). This placed sport in the forefront of the tensions between Soviet communism and Western capitalism, with Cuba and America as the two key players representing each ideological team.

Cuba was quite vocal in their revolutionary model of sports, while also critiquing "capitalist sports." In a 1969 interview with *Granma*, the official publication of the Communist Party of Cuba, Castro stated,

One day, when the Yankees accept peaceful coexistence with our own country, we shall beat them at baseball too and then the advantages of revolutionary over capitalist sports will be shown!...We aspire to give our example of the triumph of a worthy concept of sports...We have raised the revolutionary concept of sports... in addition to having taught lessons to the enemy, they have also achieved an extraordinary victory, not for country, but for an idea. (*Granma Weekly Review*)

As idealistic as this sounds, sports were not an escape from the grim realities of the failed socialism promises from Castro and company. For baseball players, especially, these two countries were the land of opportunity for a career on the diamond.

The Karl Marx to Uncle Sam Pipeline

Major League Baseball was experiencing tremendous growth in the postwar years. The growth in attendance helped aid the slump experienced during the war, though the creation of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League helped sustain professional baseball in the Midwest while men, including professional athletes, were serving in the armed forces (Fidler). The 1947 season marked a significant

step of progress in race relations within the United States when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in professional baseball as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers. While this was (and still is) a profoundly important moment for racial inclusion, it marked the beginning of the end for the Negro League, which were seen as a valuable asset and business opportunity for many Black entrepreneurs (Lanctot). Yet, many of these Black players from the Negro League and white MLB players would flock to the Caribbean in the off-season to play in the Cuban Leagues. In fact, most historians acknowledge this league was the most competitive, elite level of play in the world, at that time, because it was an integrated, more equitable playing field than MLB.

The Cuban League continued to operate into the 1950s, even though the Mexican League became stiff competition when they started to sign big named players during the late 1940s. However, the Cuban League's biggest demise would not be their neighbors to the west, but instead from their own baseball loving leader. Following the Cuban Revolution, the political estrangement between Cuba and the United States severed the relative ease in which players could flow back and forth between the two countries. Major and minor league teams grew skeptical of their players spending their winters playing ball in the "new" Cuba. In 1961, the league folded—only for non-Cuban players. Castro, who was once scouted by the Washington Senators, wanted to blend his love of the sport and the idea of this post-revolutionary man. As a result, the professional league on the island turned into an amateur league only available for Cubans (Kelly).

During these years, Cuba fielded impressive teams which performed well during international tournament competitions. At home, the shoddy, run-down stadiums were packed full with fellow countrymen and women to cheer on their national team. Katie Krall stated, "While in the US a Little Leaguer might dream of playing shortstop for the Yankees, in Cuba there was no higher honor than being named to the national team" (Krall). Cuban baseball historian Peter C. Bjarkman described this league as a near "alternate universe" to the other professional leagues in the United States,

and even abroad, like the Japanese professional leagues (Bjarkman, "Cuban League"). While Castro saw the league's success as a symbol of socialist triumph, it did spur a sense of nationalistic pride in the players who felt torn between staying in Cuba and seeking the fame from professional teams in the United States.

In 1977, former MLB Commissioner Bowie Kuhn released the "Kuhn Directive", which clarified the MLB's stance on emigrating Cuban players. In short, the policy essentially forbid MLB teams from discussions to sign any baseball player from Cuba. This signified to Cuban players that if they wanted a chance on an MLB roster, defection appeared to be the only option. Furthermore, the Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) of 1966 gave Cubans, who resided in the United States for one year, permanent status (Greller). The abandonment of the amateur and national team in Cuba for American professional baseball was, to Castro, the ultimate betrayal.

For the latter half of the 20th century, the two countries danced in a purgatory of hostility, while maintaining slight functionality. However, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked an important turning point in the relationship between Cuba, the United States, MLB, and baseball players. Economic issues began to immediately arise once the monetary Soviet assistance of nearly \$4,000,000,000 abruptly ceased and the embargo from the United States seemed insurmountable to alleviate the blow to the budget. In fact, Cuba's gross domestic product fell by 37%, while 50% of the economy lost its purchasing power (Huish 31). Cuban baseball quickly began to deteriorate, leaving players with seemingly sole option of a hopeful MLB career over hometown glory. When Cuban national team pitcher René Arocha left his country for the United States in 1991, the defection dominos began to tumble.

Arocha, along with many players suffocating under the collapsed Cuban economy and waning disillusionment of national loyalty, were faced with many difficult decisions. It was definitely not a simple choice to leave one's homeland for a new country. Arocha, who played for the Cuban national team for over ten years, feared the Cuban government would retaliate against his family after viewing his departure as an

“act of high treason” (Greller). Yet, once in the United States, Archoa sought political asylum and was able to achieve residency through the CAA. While these were proverbial green lights for Archoa, MLB was unsure how to proceed since the Kuhn Directive addressed players in Cuba, not Cuban players in the United States. Ultimately, once Archoa was able to satisfy the MLB’s residency requirements, a special lottery-style draft allowed the St. Louis Cardinals to win the drawing, negotiate, and sign Archoa to a contract (Greller).

This set an early precedent for drafting Cuban players during this tumultuous geopolitical time, which allowed players to only be considered for the draft each June, only if they were to follow legal immigration steps, including seeking asylum and obtaining residency. On October 11, 1992, Omani Estrada and Alexis Cabreja illegally entered the United States, hoping to join teams as free agents, rather than through a draft. Understandably, MLB advised all teams against signing unauthorized aliens. Both Estrada and Cabreja waited until the following June to be selected in the draft. It was worth the wait, given the Texas Rangers selected both players (Greller).

Throughout the decade, an increasing number of highly talented players continued to leave Cuba, and the risky move was appearing to pay off. By 1997 and 1998, half-brothers Livan and Orlando Hernandez won the World Series with their respective teams (Greller). Yet, their journey to hoisting the trophy in October began with Livan sneaking away from his hotel when training with the Cuban national team in Mexico to board a flight for Venezuela. Seen as a traitor, Orlando was subsequently kicked off the national team, which prompted his decision to depart for the Bahamas in the middle of the night on a small dinghy (Associated Press). For their fellow curious Cubans back home, this was the ultimate success story for the opportunity defection could bring. For Americans, the Cuban players remained pawns in the aftermath of the Cold War conflict, too, except on the other side of the border. Their successes in the United States seemed to add runs for democracy’s team on the proverbial scoreboard. In short, the more success the defectors had in MLB, the

more Americans could relish in the downfalls of Castro, communism, and Cuba. In fact, Cuban baseball players began to receive “favorable treatment [...] over other Cubans, and over other Latin American refugees because of the damaging political implications to the Castro government” (Greller). Ultimately, this proves that sports and its athletes can be players on the field and courts just as much as they can be for governmental leaders all over the world.

Who’s Next at Bat?

These players made difficult decisions regarding their futures that would impact their families for generations to come. Katie Krall’s research (2019) outlines a “cost-benefit analysis of the value of defection.” She concludes that “strong familial and community ties” kept many players in Cuba, especially those players who bought into the nationalistic pride Castro preached to young men vying for a spot on the national team. Yet, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent effects in Cuba tainted the rose colored glasses many Cuban baseball players had worn for decades.

Not all players chased the salary and the American Dream. For Omar Linares, his patriotic sentiments towards Cuba kept him home. Some even referred to him as the “poster boy for deep-seated loyalty” for playing on the national team, though he was frequently approached by MLB teams to make the underground journey to the United States (Bjarkman, “Omar Linares”). Though Linares was making a mere \$20 a month while playing in Cuba, he truly believed he was a comrade for Castro and the state. In 1999, the Cuban national team defeated the Baltimore Orioles in an exhibition game. Linares was overcome with joy and pride. “Commander-in-chief, the mission you gave us has been completed,” he proclaimed, even going as far to add, “Socialismo o muerte! (*Socialism or death!*) Patria o muerte! (*Homeland or death!*) Venceremos! (*We will triumph!*)” (Jamail 142).

Dedication to one’s homeland can be viewed as an admirable trait, regardless of which ideological camp you call home. However, the blend between sport and nationalism as a weapon for diplomacy has become impossible

to separate in the past century. Eric Hobsbawm describes this concept as the “gap between private and public worlds was bridged by sport” (Hobsbawm 142). The agendas of some of the most powerful men in the world relied upon athletes to fulfill their diplomatic ambitions dreamed up in war rooms thousands of miles away from a baseball field.

Even as heated tensions between the United States and Cuba briefly thawed during the Obama administration, uncertainty remains for athletes today. For a moment, the eased embargo and open borders for tourists signified a turning point for not only citizens, but especially for Cuban baseball players who had waved goodbye to any chance of returning to their homeland after defection. For many, their journey to America was geopolitically and physically dangerous. In 1993, shortstop Rey Ordóñez scaled a fence at the World University Games in Buffalo, New York to escape his team and Cuba’s communism on foot. In 1996, Rolando Arrojo was pitching for the Cuban national team at the Olympic Games in Atlanta when he snuck out of the hotel, jumped in a vehicle, and found his way to Miami. In 2012, slugger Yasiel Puig was smuggled off island with the assistance of a Mexican drug cartel (Associated Press).

These risky voyages illustrate the strong sentiments athletes feel when deciding the fate of their futures. The intersection of sport and politics is not a new concept. In fact, the merging of sport, nationalism, and diplomacy has long been a theme for many countries who utilize athletes to employ a particular agenda. It is time to acknowledge this unique relationship for what it is, rather than vilify athletes for choosing what they determine to be best for themselves and their family. For the fan, sport is seen as a recreational escape from the grim and deflating realities of the world. For many athletes, those realities are their world.

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