
PETTAVINO, PAUL J., AND GERALYN PYE. *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994. Pp. ix, 301. Map, tables, notes, index. \$19.95 pb., \$49.95 cb.

One of the jokes circulating in Cuba in recent years combines the claim that the three most notable successes of the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro have been education, health care, and sports, with the admission that the three greatest failures have been breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Whatever one's view of El Comandante and his socialist experiment, there is little denying that since the 1970s Cubans have performed quite well in the international sports arena.

Shortly before the publication of the Pettavino-Pye volume, Cuba twice displayed its athletic power. As host of the 1991 Pan American Games, it captured 265 medals, including ten more golds than the United States; later, at the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, Cuba won a total of 31 medals, placing fifth in gold medals and sixth in total medals. Since then, Cuba, with a population of only 11.5 million and despite continued economic difficulties, has won a demographically disproportionate share of medals at the 1995 Pan American Games in Argentina (172 total medals, 78 gold) and at the 1996 Summer Olympics (25, 9). The last accomplishment means that Cuba carried home from Atlanta more medals than Canada (22, 3) and, within Latin America, more than Brazil (population 160 million, 15 medals), Argentina (34 million, 3 medals), and Mexico (90 million, one medal).

These achievements draw strength, in part, from a Cuban public long enthusiastically interested in doing sports and in supporting their more athletically talented fellow citizens, especially in baseball and boxing. But, as the authors note, pre-1959 Cuban sports were elitist, often racist, and definitely sexist. They were also, though tempered by a deep sense of Cuban nationalism, strongly influenced by the United States. To the degree that the government and other institutions became involved in sport, recreation, and leisure, it was "to promote the ideological and political hegemony of the dominant forces" (p. 59). (It can be argued that since 1959 the same generalization applies; it's just that different forces now dominate.) Although their interpretation may be reasonable, unfortunately Pettavino and Pye do not give the history of pre-1959 Cuban sports adequate attention or recognition (45 pages). Clearly, more remains to be done (Graduate students, here is a dissertation topic!) on institutions, government policy and spending, individual athletes, and public attitudes. Above all, we need more work before we can properly characterize the nature of Cuba's athletic relationship with the United States. Did the relationship reflect a pattern of Yankee cultural imperialism and exploitation, or did it illustrate rational Cuban choice and response to opportunity?

The foundation of the post-1959 athletic success lies above all in the extensive sports system, which the Castro regime has built over three decades. Even in the early months of the Revolution, Cuba's new leaders took steps to open sports and recreation facilities to a larger public. But the center of the new approach to

national physical culture began to take shape with the creation of the National Institute of Sports, Physical Education, and Recreation (INDER) in February 1961; professional sports were outlawed the following year. With Cubans convinced that sport is “a right of the people” (p. 96), the government has sought to promote health and fitness through sporting activities (to some degree for military purposes), to socialize the population, to strengthen its own legitimacy, and to enhance the international image of socialist Cuba. It has also sought to reduce dependency on foreign sporting equipment and technical expertise. Throughout, “while Cubans modeled their sports system after that of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries,” they “have kept their system uniquely Cuban” (p. 68).

To achieve these various objectives, the Cubans have created a complex system of sporting activities at various skill and age levels; a network for recruiting talented young athletes and training them to move to higher levels of competition; factories to produce bats, balls, and other sporting equipment to meet domestic needs; sophisticated medical research and testing centers to give sports a sound scientific basis; and publications to herald the value of sports and the achievements of Cuban athletes.

I perceive that the authors are not sure how to weigh the successes and failures of the sports system under Castro, just as the regime has not always been sure how to balance the pursuit of mass participation with that of raising elite performance, though to many Cubans “both goals mutually support each other in a continual cycle of interdependence” (p. 13). Both mass participation and elite performance have unquestionably improved since 1959, yet many Cubans still remain outside the popular sports realm once they finish school. Male sports and athletes appear to receive more support and recognition than female, in a society with persistent sexist inclinations—note the recent resurgence of prostitution, as the economy flounders and more Cubans seek hard currencies by various means. Elite athletes often earn material rewards not offered to the bulk of the population, though hero-worship is not encouraged, and athletes certainly do not get rich off their talent. And the positive achievements have come at what many consider a high political cost. In the face of this, the authors’ ambivalence no doubt says more about the situation in Cuba itself than about the authors, highlighting both the complexity of the case and the emotional political implications of evaluating any part of the Castro regime.

There is also uncertainty in their discussion of what might happen to the Cuban sports structure in the future. (Who *can* predict the future with certainty?) It seems likely that, for economic reasons, sports may lose even under a surviving Castro, and in fact the nature of sports is changing already: budgets are cut; money is sought for appearances abroad by Cuban athletes and for services rendered by Cuban coaches; and more athletes defect. However, in October 1996, the Cuban sports authorities suspended from all competition for life three leading baseball players because of their ties with a Cuban-American scout who was persuading Cuban players to defect; this action suggests that the regime intends to maintain at least the image of its chosen ideological stance. And the number

of “boat people” and other emigrants at various times in recent years may indicate that, as in Eastern Europe, successful sports and recreation programs can only do so much to solidify popular contentment, national identity, and regime loyalty. After Castro, especially if the exiles return, the “amateur” program is most likely to suffer. Yet any post-Castro government’s sports program will surely be compared to the Castro era based in part on its mass and elite athletic accomplishments.

The book is well organized, easy to read, supported by statistics, and substantially documented, though a bibliography would help immensely. Factual errors are relatively few. Perhaps most historians of sports will not be disturbed by the excessive number of misplaced or omitted accent marks for Spanish words and names, but historians of Latin America surely will. This sloppiness reflects badly on the skills of the authors and the reliability of a prestigious press that has contributed so much to the Latin American studies field.

In short, despite the flaws, this is a significant contribution to our understanding of the so-called Cuban Revolution and of the role that sports can play in the processes of political planning, social change, and international relations. Whether readers agree with the authors’ interpretations or not, they should be grateful for the authors’ description of the workings of the Cuban sports system since the early 1960s.

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