

ECHEVARRIA, ROBERTO GONZALEZ. *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. xiii + 464. Illustrated, index. \$35.00 cb.

In an earlier publication, Latin baseball historian Rob Ruck correctly referred to Cuba as the Caribbean's "epicenter" of baseball. Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria's *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* substantiates this claim and brings to print the first extensive study of Cuba's baseball past written in English. Gonzalez, a professor of Hispanic and Comparative Literature at Yale, has captured this rich baseball tradition and, more importantly, its relationship to Cuban culture.

Divided into the appropriate nine chapters (innings), *Pride of Havana* is a combination of personal narrative and history. Baseball fans will enjoy learning more about such icons as Anastansio "Tony" Perez, Luis Tiant, and Pedro "Tony" Oliva, among so many others, than available in earlier texts. But Echevarria also describes the impact of players far less familiar to North American baseball aficionados, such as Alejandro Oms, Silvio Garcia, and Lazaro Salazar. Indeed, from the Cuban perspective many of these players, whose careers were primarily played out on the island, were heroes in the Pearl of the Antilles. Moreover, though most baseball observers recognize that Cuba's baseball origins parallel those of its North American counterparts, Echevarria's extensive research into Cuban newspapers, diaries, and amateur histories that date back into the nineteenth century enables him to skillfully reveal the depth of Cuba's passion for the game. Readers learn that clubs representing such townships as Almendares, Cienfuegos, and Fe, have histories and traditions which rival those of the New York Giants and Cincinnati Reds. Such famous Cuban landmarks as the Gran Stadium and La Tropical, the author points out, also emerge as critical to understanding Cuban baseball's past: "La Tropical had been the shrine where most established Cuban players had become famous" (52). Gran Stadium, on the other hand, housed many of the foreign players. Ultimately, each park, at various times in its history, symbolized both a celebration of national heritage and, to an extent, the shadows of foreign encroachment.

Baseball buffs will appreciate the first three chapters, on Cuban baseball within the foul lines, but chapter 4, and much of the remaining portion of the book, will intrigue the social historian, including much about the game's influence off the field. Convinced that Cuban baseball history to this point remains saturated with "inaccuracies and distortions" (75), Echevarria cites Wenceslao Galvez's *El baseball en Cuba: Historia del Base-Ball en la Isla de Cuba* (1889) and Raul Diaz Muro's *Historia del baseball profesional en Cuba* (1907) to set the record straight. He describes the game's beginnings, its transition from obscurity to popularity, and even its relationship to the "decadent" spirit of the belle époque" and, particularly, "explicit erotic play" (87). Careful not to imply that Cubans of all class lines interpreted the game in this manner, Echevarria maintains that Cuba's upper crest contributed greatly to the game's eventual popularity.

The discussion in chapter 5 of Cuban baseball's "Golden Era"—1898 through the 1930s—is a real gem, including poignant portrayals of such international icons as Jose Mendez, a black star "not given to vulgar self-promotion" (131), Miguel "Mike" Angel Gonzalez, a man Echevarria crowns "the most knowledgeable baseball man in Cuba" (144), and Adolfo Luque, a player associated with the rumba (another cultural connection). These and other great players from the island played in a period that included other legendary Cuban stars, major league and North American black icons, and the famed 1932 Leopards of Santa

Clara—a club Echevarria claims to be Cuba's greatest team. The most important reason for this "golden age," however, was that the island's game developed at four levels: professional, semipro, sugar mill, and amateur. In short, at this time, the game exhibited its greatest impact on Cubanos. But the author does not give context short shrift. He reminds readers of the international recognition of Cuban art, literature, and music, a boom in Havana's tourist industry, and expansion of North American-influenced culture (or, from a cynical standpoint, an extension of United States cultural imperialism).

*The Pride of Havana* concludes with an in-depth analysis of Cuban baseball within the scope of the Revolution; its importance cannot be understated. Underscoring a theme that describes Cuban baseball as largely a labor of love, in Cuba the game "is free of the hoopla surrounding the actual contests in the majors and minors in the United States, where the game seems to be a pretext for a spectacle designed to entertain the fans and keep them consuming all the products sold at the stadiums" (362). Prima donna players are virtually nonexistent, and the game is never undermined by a strike. While the author, to be sure, acknowledges the clear financial advantages of North American professional baseball, to a certain extent "revolutionary baseball" represents the ideal that, in the United States, has gone by the wayside, overrun by the corporate mentality of club owners and players' agents. But Echevarria points out that baseball under Castro's totalitarian regime also is a game in which the controlling nature of the government treats players as under "conscription" (363).

*The Pride of Havana* is thorough and, at times, emotional. Echevarria's creative prose personifies both the aesthetic nature of the island's game, as well as its complicated past. Still, the mechanics of the book do require comment, particularly in the area of syntax and citation. Throughout the book, Echevarria not only told the overall story, but was at times part of it. To be sure, the first person within the context of a historical narrative is no longer unusual, and can be very effective. Peter Levine's outstanding work, *From Ellis Island to Ebbetts Field*, is just such an example. But Levine's study also included extensive footnotes; excluding the introduction and concluding chapters, Levine averaged 52 citations per chapter. By contrast, Echevarria averaged thirteen. Moreover, many of these footnotes were personal recollections, which, of course, related to his first person narrative. But, given the extent of impressive research listed in the bibliography (70 books on Cuban baseball and 54 on Cuban history and culture alone), the author, surprisingly, did not more fully incorporate these documented materials into his notes; indeed, none of the citations include secondary sources. In short, personal recollection is often effective, as Echevarria demonstrated several times. But supporting given comments with documented research is equally important, particularly to readers not necessarily unfamiliar with baseball or its history, but concerned with the dynamics of sport in relationship to culture and nationalism. To the point, the extensive citation of documented materials advances the analysis, and in this case, the insightful connections of baseball and the Cuban psyche. Another small, but noticeable point, was the author's propensity to comment "as far as I know..." (83) or "I have been told" (405). These statements, made often in the text, suggest some degree of uncertainty or guesswork.

*The Pride of Havana*, nonetheless, advances our understanding of both baseball's impact on Cuba, and Cuba's impact on baseball. And, beyond the lines, Echevarria's work not only illuminates the romanticism of Cuban culture and history, but adds an important chapter to the growing field of Pan American and global studies.

—SAMUEL O. REGALADO  
*California State University Stanislaus*