

# Baseball in the Caribbean

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Soon after the World Series marks season's end in the United States, baseball springs back to life in and around the Caribbean basin. There, against a backdrop of tropical skies, seasonal labor, and political instability, some of the best baseball in the world is played each winter.

Although the Marines might have infected the Caribbean with baseball fever during their occupations early this century, the peoples of the region have since made the game into their own national pastime. "It's more than a game," Dominican winter league manager Winston Llenas remarked several years ago. "It's almost a way of life."

This presentation sketched the origins and evolution of the sport in the region, focusing on cultural contacts between the United States and these countries as well as contacts among them. It argues that occupation by the United States, subsequent support for the game by corporations interested in promoting employee loyalty and morale, and the sponsorship of *the game* by *caudillos* such as Rafael Trujillo, Anastasio Somoza and Fulgencio Batista contributed to the development of the game into a key cultural institution.

In the process, baseball assumed a number of meanings to these nations. It was both an index of United States cultural hegemony, a means by which companies solidified their control over their workforces; and a tool by which national leaders maintained their image. But while reflecting these dynamics of control, the game has subsequently taken on new meanings, particularly in the last quarter of a century.

With the decline of direct US military control, company sponsorship and autocratic rule; and with the emergence of the region as the major source of new talent in organized baseball since 1960; baseball has become a source of cohesion in these nations and an arena in which national consciousness has matured. The game has provided a sense of grace and competence as well as a vehicle by which they can confront, at least symbolically, their neo-dependency and vulnerability with respect to the United States.