

Visión de los jóvenes para incentivar el mejoramiento de las relaciones entre Cuba y EE.UU.

Optimizing cultural exchange within existing academic exchange programs via sportsdiplomacy: encouraging old and new methods of the “people to people” approach.

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Abstract: The pendulum of cold and warm relations between the United States and Cuba aremarked by incidents of sports diplomacy. In 1999, the Clinton Administration eased travelrestrictions and supported more cultural exchange. This was also the year where Peter Angelos,then owner of Baltimore’s MLB team the Orioles, was allowed to carry out something he hadlong lobbied for: the “home and home” series between the Baltimore Orioles and Cubannational team. It was the first time in 40 years that an MLB team had played on the island, and itsymbolized a thawing of relations. Obama started the process of normalization with his historicvisit in 2016, a visit that concluded with a friendly baseball game between the Tampa Bay Raysand the Cuban national team. Using the legacy of sports diplomacy between the two countriesand drawing on my personal experiences with sports teams at the University of Havana, I aim toexplore the possibilities for optimizing cultural exchange within existing academic exchange viasports. Sports diplomacy through events like the MLB series mentioned, or folded into academicprograms in collaboration with universities or institutions that have long standing exchangeprograms would “cast a larger net” in an effort to incentivize students from the U.S. to engage inintercultural exchange with Cuban students. Through more “people to people” exchanges, in thiscase “student to student” or “athlete to athlete,” public sentiment or perception of U.S.-Cubarelations would hopefully help in mobilizing students in the U.S. (a group that has a legacy oforganizing in solidarity with the globally marginalized groups) to call for a shift in the aggressiveofficial U.S. policy toward the island and its people.

Baseball. It’s a big deal in Cuba. Sports in general are central to Cuban society. Justlooking at Cuba’s success on the international level, especially with baseball, it’s quiteimpressive for a small country. Cuba’s baseball team essentially dominated internationaltournaments from the 1990s through the 2000s, a feat to be proud of. Before coming to Cuba, Iknew baseball was big in Cuba. I didn't really understand the culture around sports until I gothere. For me personally, participation in sports tournaments at the University of Havana has beeneye-opening in terms of understanding just how important sports are for Cubans, and especialyyoung Cubans. Even when you walk through Vedado, you can often see children playing mypreferred sport, soccer. Yet, baseball is inevitably still at the heart of Cuban identity. It’ssomething that every Cuban taxi driver will be able to talk to you about.

When you look at the history of “America's pastime” on the island, it’s quiteinteresting...it was brought here by three Cuban college students who studied in MobileAlabama at Spring Hill College. After graduating in 1864, they came back to Cuba with a ball

and bat and introduced the game to the island right here in Vedado where the first Cuban baseballclub would form two years later. There is a marker here in Vedado on Linea and Hcommemorating this history. The history of the evolution of baseball in Cuba reflects thecloseness in the histories of the two countries and also explains why baseball plays an importantrole in Cuban society and why interestingly, why it has played an interesting role in US-Cubarelations.

Sports diplomacy is not a novel concept. The most famous example being ping-pong diplomacy in the 1970s, where table tennis matches between the US and China were highly publicized in an effort to ease Cold War tensions between the two sides. Baseball diplomacy, especially between the US and Cuba also has precedents. In fact, the pendulum of cold and warm relations between the United States and Cuba over the past few decades are marked by incidents of baseball diplomacy. In 1999, the Clinton Administration eased travel restrictions and supported more cultural exchange. This was also the year where Peter Angelos, then owner of MLB team the Baltimore Orioles, was allowed to carry out something he had long lobbied for: the "home and home" series between the Baltimore Orioles and Cuban national team, with one game being played in Havana's Estadio Latinoamericano and the other in Maryland. It was the first time in 40 years that an MLB team had played on the island, and it symbolized a thawing of relations. Obama started the process of normalization with his historic visit in 2016, a visit that concluded with a friendly baseball game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban national team. Both the Clinton and Obama administration took advantage of baseball being a natural unifier between the two countries and to quote a letter from White House Chief of Staff Bowles (Bowles) addressed to the President of Major League Sports Robert Weinstein 1998, they understood sports "in the context of both international events and bilateral exchanges, [as] an important part of the people to people interaction."

Now under Trump, we know he's reversed Obama's more friendly policies toward Cuba.

His administration was also responsible, for canceling a 2018 deal between MLB and the Cuban Baseball Federation known as the FCB that would've allowed Cuban ball players to play in the MLB without defecting and would've allowed Cuban players to live in or visit Cuba. It was negotiated in an effort to prevent human trafficking that defectors were vulnerable to. It was signed in December of 2018 under the Trump Administration but in April 2019 the same Administration backtracked on the agreement citing that it violates U.S. law because it constitutes trading with the Cuban government and despite OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) recognizing FCB as independent from the Cuban government.

To give a more complete context, there is also a business incentive for foreign leagues and especially, the MLB to lobby for deals like this. Additionally, I think it's important to note that Cuba has recently changed their rules and has made it easier for players to be able to play abroad in other foreign professional leagues by lowering their eligibility standards. This also seems to be part of a shift where the Cuban government allows for both amateur and professional sports at the same time. For example, it is now starting to make an effort for Cuban sports

channels to broadcast professional sports. Keep in mind professional sports were abolished after the revolution.

In terms of my future outlook, unfortunately, considering the domestic and international context and with elections coming up, I think President Biden has little incentive to change Cuban policy any time soon. So while I don't see there being a friendly series or a lift in the blockade happening anytime soon, it could happen later on. I think it's important to be optimistic. Sports can be a way to almost depoliticize the U.S.-Cuba exchange that is more focused on socialization and centers the participation of each society. Given the historical precedents, I see sports means for optimizing use of the channels that already exist to "cast a wider net" and encourage more people, especially students and young people to come to Cuba or at least take interest in Cuba and its relationship with the U.S. Young people and college students have a long legacy of provoking shifts in political inertia in Washington and can effectively change public

sentiment. Sports diplomacy at any level won't fix U.S.-Cuba relations, especially not right now. But this is a strategy that might bear fruit in the long run. As in, those who witness and participate in these types of exchanges might play a significant role in creating the domestic circumstances that are compatible with lifting the blockade, taking Cuba off the State Sponsors of Terrorism, and normalizing relations.