

An Epic Tragedy

José Hugo Fernández
Writer and Journalist
Havana, Cuba

The recent state-mandated suspension of pitcher Yadel Martí and fielder Yasser Gómez, two outstanding Cuban baseball players who have been charged with serious misconduct, has stoked the coals of a truly encouraging debate; it reveals people's desires and radicalizes thinking about topics that for too long were considered taboo.¹

Despite the fact the authorities did not elaborate much on what exactly these athletes did wrong, everyone seems to know that they attempted to leave the island by sea. Their punishment for this was not on account of having violated any immigration law or rules; instead, it was a drastic sentence—handed down without a trial. They have been suspended indefinitely, which keeps them from doing what they do best—physically and intellectually, and from being as socially useful as possible. They are being kept from continuing to grow as human beings.

One need not be a legal expert to understand that this punishment does not

match the crime. Its immensity is what is fueling the flames with regard to these Cuban athletes and their arguable defenselessness and dependence vis-à-vis the government.

One cannot deny the a priori and unprecedented push the government, itself, has given the development of this amateur sport on the Island, or the committed material and strategic support that has characterized its relationship to the actual playing of the sport since its earliest days in power. Much less can we underestimate the doubtless fact that our excellence in sports over the past decades has contributed mightily to the full social recognition for which many Cuban blacks fought for hundreds of years. It is more than well known that it is blacks who have won us the most world and Olympic championships in what is now called the Revolutionary sport.

There has been a history of sustained support for sports in Cuba between October 1, 1961, when the first Physical Education Primary School, with its yearly capacity to

graduate hundreds of instructors,² was initially established in Havana (or between August 22nd, 1963, when the First National Scholastic Sporting Games, which are the primary source of the Cuban sports movement, were held³), and today, when Cuba garners hundreds of Olympic, world, and regional medals in a broad array of fields (it has made Cuba a model for nations around the globe). It has involved teaching and specialization, as well as the development of mechanisms by which to promote massive and systematic participation in sports, for example, the construction of facilities, the use of technology and science, and sustained, high-level participation at international events.

This is proof of the special kind of support the government has always offered athletic development. It is equally clear that Cuban blacks have benefited from this. At the same time, the country and government benefit from their achievements, too. Yet, this chapter is fraught with lights and shadows. On the one hand, there is the almost untapped, inexhaustible source of talent and energy wasting away among the Cuban slave-descendant population (laying almost dormant, due mostly to inattentiveness). On the other is what is possible for them, in the short, mid and long term, when they have access to programs that systematically treat them differently. On the other hand, and in contrast, one plainly sees how much the Revolutionary government could have done for this part of the population in fifty years and didn't (or didn't do the way it did with sports because it also limited the contribution of blacks) in other cultural, economic and social contexts. Yet, this matter is as vast as it is complex, and it is distracting us from the specific focus of this article. It is not my purpose to concentrate only and

above all on unique phenomena but rather to attempt a cursory look at the limits of the matter that is being debated in Havana these days. Unfortunately, it is not also happening in the media, or even in special circles, but only on the street, in neighborhoods, where the people are.

Furthermore, the recent sanctioning of these two outstanding baseball players is just one more twist in—let's say—the clumsy and incorrect actions and attitudes that characterize the government's treatment of Cuban athletes. It is extremely paternalistic and controlling, quite reminiscent of slave-owners back in slavery times.

Worse yet, the government's attitude becomes incredibly arrogant and clumsy when it feels its charges seem ungrateful to it. This is exactly what has been going on for a while now every time a Cuban athlete attempts to and/or succeeds in emigrating abroad or getting asylum in one of the countries in which he will be taken to participate in competition (actually, it has always been the case but it is much more frequent and noticeable now). The fame our amateur champions achieve, particularly in areas like baseball, boxing, track and field, or volleyball, among others, makes them an attractive center of attention for organizations whose goal it is to sign up promising rookies for professional sports. This is not a good time to judge the standards by which both amateur and professional sports are conducted, or to make comparisons either. It goes without saying that any moderately free athlete should have the right to choose, at his own risk, whichever of the two ways to use his talent—a talent he owes to no sponsor, because it is innate. The very least one might have to consider are the costs incurred in his training, but in our context: a) those athletes have already paid back the equivalent of those

costs, mostly through the economic gain their triumphs at international competitions have brought the government, or through the fame and glory of their achievements, which result in net gains for the sponsor; b) the sponsor has been little more than the investment's handler, since it is public funds, the product of our entire society's work, that have paid the costs for the training of those athletes. We must see things as they are without forgetting the government's decisive role as administrator in all this.

What is unjustifiable no matter how you look at it is that the minute one of our athletes decides to reject the government's patronage and go live somewhere abroad to resume his career on his own, he is labeled a traitor and unpatriotic. There is even an attempt to muck up his honor and integrity as an honest person. Moreover, the government de facto prohibits his return to his homeland, even for a visit. Just recently, after saying absolutely nothing about this cruel system of revenge (killing them with silence, as one of our most popular expressions says), Fidel Castro, himself, the leader and president of this government for over half a century, penned something for the whole world to read about these athletes he calls deserters: "We must never permit these traitors to visit our country so they can show off the luxuries they've obtained with their infamy."⁴

The memory of the case of the two great Cuban boxing champions of our time, Guillermo Rigondeaux, twice world champion and Olympic bantamweight, and Erislandy Lara, welterweight champion of the world, is still fresh in our minds, especially because it was all over the international media. They attempted to "desert" during the 2007 Panamerican Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Finally, Rigondeaux and Lara were, in fact, returned to Cuba, after Fidel Castro

issued a series of offensive tirades directed at these athletes, and against those who were allegedly contracting them for professional boxing,⁵ but not before negotiating a vague process by which they would be repatriated (which no one in Cuba understands yet). The international media also received word that these two champions were then indefinitely suspended from the ring (by omnipotent sentence, with no trial). It may be less well known that both men, but most notably Rigondeaux, publicly apologized more than once (even though their offense was never quite clarified) and very humbly asked the government for a new chance to show their mettle (Rigondeaux was one of the most outstanding leaders of Cuban revolutionary boxing, although this did not keep him from living in the extreme poverty that is so very normal for blacks here). Their apologies were in vane. The ban on them has yet to be lifted, even when after a new attempt, one of these two athletes, Erislandy Lara, managed to escape the island and is currently boxing professionally.

Even if one takes the words and attitude of the Revolution's leader as rebuffs born of very bitter anger, and struggles to understand the reasons he believes he has for feeling betrayed and even swindled, it is impossible not to see in them a direct reference to, if not a hint of, the behavior of those supreme lords of human destiny we thought we'd left behind, back in the nineteenth century, after the slave period formally ended.

Direct reference or hint

In his monumental work *El Ingenio* [The Sugarmill], Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals tells of the existence of so-called "slave breeding farms"⁶ in mid-

nineteenth century, some of them in central and western Cuba. It explains that a group of wealthy Creole landowners decided that breeding blacks for slave work was less dangerous and more profitable than bringing them from Africa. This also guaranteed that each “piece” would give maximum yield and remain healthier, because of the attention given to the physical development of their skills and their adaptation to the environment. Moreno Fragonals carefully recreates the case of a slave-breeding farm at the Santísima Trinidad sugarmill. The owner describes it in the following manner: “But of all the slave breeders in Cuba, the most conspicuous, the truly exceptional and almost unreal one was Esteban José Santa Cruz de Oviedo.”⁷⁷ At Santísima Trinidad alone this opulent landowner owned more than 1000 slaves. His breeding farm, renowned for the care with which future slaves were treated, fed and developed, increased his holdings by 30 slaves a year.

Manuel Moreno Fragonals also recounts that the owner of that slave-breeding farm, whose wife was sterile, “enthusiastically collaborated with his black studs in the arduous chore of insemination. By 1851, 26 of the mulatto slaves from amongst his holdings were recognized as evident sons of his.”⁷⁸

It is just one more barbarous brushstroke, one more simple detail of the greater tragedy our world has endured. Notwithstanding, it was a world that by then had already been considered ‘civilized.’ This is a chapter of Cuban history that reveals the incongruencies and retrograde, cannibalistic practices that slavery imposed on this land, despite its relative lack of economic importance or the scant attention it has received from historians. The passage, of course, has a sad ending for the mulatto

sons of Esteban José Santa Cruz de Oviedo. It could be no other way. Their entire existence was sad, even when they were living a cosmic distance above and beyond the others who were born at the breeding farm. Their father bought them an education fit for rich whites, but they were never allowed out the house, so they would have minimum contact with the other slaves. All 26 of them were sent to New York, to study. Later, the brightest six of them were sent to Paris to complete their university education while the rest learned a trade. Yet, in a special way they continued being slaves, hostages of their authoritarian owner-father. This is how they lived till the very day of Cruz de Oviedo’s death, the same day their fairytale existence as the bastard sons of the owner ended, too. The country’s laws did not acknowledge their lineage or, of course, their right to one single penny of their rightful inheritance from their father. They were left to their own devices, impoverished and abandoned. They withered away to what they are today, an insignificant reference, a rusty hole in our memory that would hardly belong in this article if not for the fact that in some mysterious way the story seems to distantly and disquietingly point to or at least echo, inaudibly and suggestively, something about our athletes’ current situation. They are subject to a drama that is no less sad or very different from the one endured by those unfortunate sons of the breeding farm, despite the time difference.

Naturally, it is not my intention to draw a strict parallel between circumstances and figures that history—with its logical progression—has put in their correct place. That would be absurd, inappropriate and, in addition, unnecessary. In any event, the analogy is only suggestive, since it doesn’t require much effort to draw the parallels

between the historical drama and current situation.

There are weighty, patriarchal figures behind and above both the breeding farm sons and our present-day athletes; they are vested with an absolute power to unequivocally and unilaterally decide their fates, without recourse. They nourished, educated, and trained these pupils from the time they were extremely young. They gave them access to a variety of views. They might have even shown them some kindness, which is why they have given themselves absolute jurisdiction over each and every one of their steps, ideas, plans, feelings, actions.

It is not that I am trying doggedly to turn the contemporary problem into a saga of that ancient tragedy; it's just that it's hard to not do so.

The saga

I happen to personally know a singular baseball player who is currently an outstanding pitcher in the United States. I also know for a fact that his large family of poor and prospectless blacks more or less humbly eats and dresses in Cuba thanks to the great talent and effort this man puts to the test every day of his professional career. As a youth of barely eighteen, he had already shone in international arenas as a member of Cuba's youth team. Then he tried to achieve the dream of a lifetime, one he had since birth. He was inspired by his father's example; he was a veteran of the major leagues. But he could not achieve this without first escaping from his country and going north. He tried it. When he failed, he paid very dearly for the attempt. He was forced to distance himself from playing baseball for a number of years, at the height of his athletic talent, and survive at the

awfulest and worse paid jobs—the only ones he could get. Finally, thanks to help he got from other already pro Cuban players, he was able to escape the island to fulfill his dream. For this he paid a different kind of price; he cannot go back to Cuba to visit his family members. The government won't let him. He is unpatriotic.

Cuban professor Roberto González Echevarría, of Yale University,⁹ exalts the name of many prominent Cuban baseball stars who became legend in the U.S. major leagues. He does so in his wonderful, essential book, *The Pride of Havana*, about Cuban baseball history. Among them, many today have the honor of being in the privileged Baseball Hall of Fame. More than just a few of those who were actively playing when the Revolution triumphed in Cuba, or who became famous sometime later, during the sixties, had no other (or were given no other) option but to permanently live outside Cuba, unlike before 1959. That did not cause any one of them to keep from considering himself a Cuban baseball player; they were all were proud of this, which allowed them to continue increasing Cuba's prestige as a baseball power. Despite this, the government and sports authorities here not only renounced these athletes because to them they were traitors and corrupt individuals, or "sell-outs," but also got rid of all books about baseball, and hid its doings under lock and key so that fans would not find out about them. Even though baseball is correctly considered our national sport, new generations born and raised under the Revolutionary government have never even learned the names of many of our history's most brilliant players, as González Echevarría points out:

"The most comprehensive effort is *Viva y en juego*, a history of baseball published

by the regime, but it is marred and limited by political propaganda and totally ignores professional baseball, which it disqualifies with monikers like sell-out baseball. But, by exalting amateur baseball (prior to the Revolution), which it tries to tie to the post-Revolutionary variety, it celebrates the Liga Amateur, which practiced apartheid. By criticizing the Liga Cubana, it condemns to oblivion great baseball stars who could never afford to play as amateurs. This book, which was written by white Cubans, is the final blow struck by the Liga Amateur and its racist policies. This omission also affects the National Sports Museum, in the Plaza de la Revolución. Excepting Martín Dihigo, the feats of the great black Cuban players who had to play professionally or semi-professionally are nowhere to be found in it. Yet, it does include some of the Amateur World Series uniforms from the forties, which were sponsored by Batista and worn by national teams made up almost entirely of white players.”¹⁰

We island Cubans have been told (and continue being told) that it is undignified and vile for an athlete of ours to choose professional play, not because it is undignified or vile, but because that is what the government calls it. But we now know that quite a few of our athletes and trainers who have not abandoned Cuba lend their services to professional teams in Japan or Latin America, without being expatriated by supreme mandate, or being labeled undignified. Perhaps this is because they have agreed to remain dependent on the government, who is their mediator, and the principal beneficiary of their earnings.

We are told (without having it convincingly explained to us) that a Cuban player is vile when he agrees to try his talent in the most competitive and symbolic baseball

scene in the world—the U.S. major leagues. Without most of them even understanding what their crime is (most of them are apolitical), they are accused of being traitors to the homeland. Their decency is completely questioned just because they chose to earn big salaries in exchange for their entirely dedicated play. They are forced to put political criteria (the government’s) before their own dreams and aspirations. One of the dangers a Cuban baseball player is warned he must confront when he rejects state sponsorship in favor of professional sports is, of course, racism, which according to the government, still exists in the American major leagues. But no one has bothered to explain to us the inexplicable fact that in our so-called Revolutionary version of baseball, in which most players, the most historically exalted ones, are black, no black team manager has ever represented Cuba internationally between 1959 and 1997 until very recently, despite thirty-eight years of Revolution.¹¹

More recently, particularly during the Mariel boat lift—in 1980, and during the migratory wave the economic crisis of the nineties generated, and has not yet ceased, a growing number of Cuban baseball players is leaving the island bent on trying their luck at the pros. Many have been successful. None has been able to fully share his joy under his native sun, with most of his family members, friends, admirers and neighbors. Because they are considered traitors and sell-outs, they are not given permission to visit their place of birth. Joy cannot be complete for them since although they have achieved success and realized their personal goals, and their social position and lifestyles have changed, they continue to bleed from the wound of what they are missing: their whole family, love, most of the places of

their childhood and adolescence, their traditions and their essential identities, in sum, their country.

Yet, these very same athletes, just like those old-time Cuban heroes of professional baseball on the island, continue dedicating their best thoughts, memories and achievements to their land of birth. The difference is that they are now known and admired (and followed as much as is possible) for their natural talent. Let us take just one example of many, although this is about one of the great idols of both so-called Revolutionary baseball and the U.S. major leagues—Orlando “El Duque” Hernández, who today unfortunately but also unwittingly represents a paradigm for black Cubans. In 1996, the authorities decided to ban El Duque (which is what all Cuban fans know him as) at the height of his career as a pitcher for the Havana *Industriales* and the Cuban national baseball team. The reason was never quite explained to fans, although it seemed obvious that it was a response to a suspicion that he was planning to leave Cuba to play pro ball in the United States. True or not, in a desperate attempt to escape from Cuba to continue his career, El Duque got to U.S. shores on a rickety vessel a year later, in December, 1997. He would soon become a star pitcher for the New York Yankees, who had just won the World Series when he arrived.

Paradoxically, after having eliminated him and El Duque no longer playing the

sport in Cuba, the authorities reacted with their typical arrogance to his achievements in the U.S. major leagues. He was an enemy and unpatriotic; it was taboo to mention his name. He, on the other hand, always takes the opportunity, when it arises, to declare that he is still, above all, a member of the *Industriales*, which is what he says in the documentary *Fuera de Liga* [Out of my League], by young Cuban filmmaker Ian Padrón. Of course, in Cuba, this movie, which recounts the history of the Havana *Industriales*, was censored for a number of years, because it includes testimonies by ball players who left our country to successfully play professional ball. Made in 2003, it was finally shown in a public movie theater in Havana during the 30th New Latin American Film Festival (December 2008). It is hardly necessary to say that the public’s reaction to it was tremendous.

Meanwhile, Orlando “El Duque” Hernández and other Cuban athletes continue bearing the stigma of being called unpatriotic in Cuba, despite the fact this is nothing more than a drama that would disappear if only the words pronounced by Fidel Castro in *Proclama contra la discriminación* [Proclamation Against Discrimination], the 22nd of March of 1959, during his early days of his rise to power, were applied to the situation: “It should not be necessary to create a law to acknowledge a right that people already have just simply for being human beings and members of society.”¹²

Notes:

1. International news agencies announced that both baseball players had managed to leave Cuba while we were preparing this issue of *ISLAS* (editor's note).
2. Cantón, José y Martín Duarte. *Cuba: 42 años de Revolución*. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2006: 86
3. Ibid 128.
4. Castro, Fidel. "El equipo asediado." Reflection published on the government web site <www.cubadebate.com>. August 1, 2008.
5. Castro, Fidel. "Para el honor, Medalla de Oro." Reflection published on the government web site <www.cubadebate.com>. August 25, 2008. Castro, Fidel. "La repugnante compraventa de atletas." Reflection published on the government web site <www.cubadebate.com>. July 28, 2008.
6. Moreno Fragnals, Manuel. *El Ingenio II*. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1978: 46,50.
7. Ibid 48.
8. Ibid 50.
9. González Echevarría, Roberto. *La gloria de Cuba*. Madrid: Editorial Colibrí, 2004.
10. Ibid 579.
11. Ibid 590.
12. Serviat, Pedro. *El problema negro en Cuba y su solución definitiva*. La Habana: Editora Política, 1986: VIII.

Other sources:

1. Betancourt, Lázaro y Basilio Fuentes. *Cuba y el mundo en los años olímpicos*. La Habana. Editorial Científico-Técnica, 2007.
2. Betancourt, L, V.L. Quintana y A. Lombard. *Atletismo en el ámbito escolar y deportivo*. La Habana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1991.