

## Baseball, journalism, and coups de grace

By José Manzaneda, February 22, 2016

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Since 2013 the Cuban government has been allowing elite athletes to play as professionals in leagues overseas. Already there are about 40 who compete with clubs in other countries, in nine sports (2). These athletes get to keep most of their income – in some cases even 90 percent – and the rest goes to the Cuba's Sports Institute, in order to provide the foundation for sport on the island.

The Cuban government has been trying for years to extend this formula also to baseball players who want to play for major league clubs in the United States. But regulations of the North American blockade against the island keep the Cuban state from receiving even a single dollar in taxes. Furthermore, they force the players to live away from the island and break their connections with Cuban sports institutions.

As a result one hundred ball players broke their ties with Cuba in just the past year in order to enter professional baseball in the United States.

That's what they have just done, two prominent figures in Cuban baseball, the brothers Yulieski and Lourdes Gourriel - and with great celebration in the international media. After participating in the Caribbean Series, in the Dominican Republic, they decided to not return to Cuba and went on to the United States.

If rules of the blockade weren't in effect, these players would have been able to sign a contract in the big leagues worth millions – some in the media come up with an amount of \$100 million - of which only 10 percent would have gone to the Cuban state. They would have been able to maintain their residence on the island and help out with sports in their own country, just like any other professional athlete in the world.

But despite the current diplomatic rapprochement between both governments, U. S. laws prevent that. Last December an important delegation from the baseball's major leagues was visiting with Obama and President Barack Obama was asked to issue a special license that allows evading the blockade and drawing up contracts with Cuban players, and [of course] reaching an agreement on this with the government in Havana.

But as of today, the license has not been issued. Time for the athletes is rapidly passing. And the two Cuban baseball players already mentioned simply decided to wait no longer.

The explanation is as obvious as it is simple. But the dominant media prefer to keep on utilizing these facts politically. They make use of a complete battery of warlike lingo for this purpose, such as: the players "escaped," they "ran away," they "sneaked away," they "fled," or "they deserted," These are expressions that serve to cover up the responsibility of the U. S. government and blame the Cuban government – once more.

For the athletes to have abandoned Cuba was being celebrated with no concealment by several newspapers that published a photograph of Fidel Castro from years back, when he was congratulating one of them. The words of the sports channel ESPN conveyed the unmistakable message of war from this photo: "For Cuban baseball, the desertion of the Gurriel brothers represents the coup de grace."

These events do affect the present crisis of Cuban baseball but there is something else at the margin that is now quite certain, which is that if anyone has received the coup de grace some time ago, it would be truthful, decent journalism within the major international media.

*Translated by Tom Whitney*

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### **Beisbol, periodismo y tiros de gracia.**

Por José Manzaneda

**Desde 2013 el Gobierno cubano permite que deportistas de élite jueguen como profesionales en ligas extranjeras (1).** Son ya cerca de 40 quienes hoy compiten en clubs de otros países, en 9 disciplinas (2). Estos deportistas reciben la parte principal de los ingresos –en algunos casos hasta el 90 %-, y el resto es ingresado por el Instituto de Deportes de Cuba, con el fin de sostener el deporte base en la Isla (3).

El Gobierno cubano lleva años tratando de extender esta fórmula también a los jugadores de béisbol que quieren fichar por clubs de las Grandes Ligas de EEUU (4). Pero **las leyes del bloqueo norteamericano a la Isla impiden que el Estado cubano reciba un solo dólar en impuestos (5).** Además, obligan a los jugadores a residir fuera de la Isla y a romper con las instituciones deportivas cubanas.

Consecuencia: solo en el pasado año un centenar de peloteros rompieron sus vínculos con Cuba para acceder al béisbol profesional de EEUU (6).

Es lo que acaban de hacer –con gran festejo en los medios internacionales- dos figuras del béisbol cubano actual: los hermanos Yulieski y Lourdes Gourriel (7). Tras participar en la Serie del Caribe, en República Dominicana, decidieron no regresar a Cuba y dirigirse a EEUU.

**Sin las leyes del bloqueo, estos jugadores habrían podido firmar un contrato millonario en las Grandes Ligas –algunos medios barajan la cifra de 100 millones de dólares (8)-, del que solo el 10 % habría ido a parar al Estado cubano.** Habrían podido mantener su residencia en la Isla, y colaborar con el deporte de su país. Como cualquier deportista profesional en el mundo.

Pero las leyes de EEUU se lo impiden, a pesar del actual acercamiento diplomático entre ambos gobiernos (9). En diciembre pasado, visitaba Cuba una importante delegación de las Grandes Ligas de Béisbol (10), que ha solicitado al Presidente Barack Obama una licencia especial que permita sortear el bloqueo y contratar jugadores cubanos, en un acuerdo consensuado con el Gobierno de La Habana (11).

Pero a día de hoy... la licencia no ha sido firmada. El tiempo para los deportistas pasa rápido. Y los dos citados beisboleros cubanos decidieron, sencillamente, no esperar más.

La explicación es así de obvia, así de sencilla. Pero los grandes medios prefieren seguir utilizando políticamente estos hechos. Para ello, emplean una completa batería de términos de guerra: los jugadores “escaparon” (12), “se fugaron” (13), “se escabulleron” (14), “huyeron” (15) o “desertaron” (16). Expresiones que sirven para camuflar la responsabilidad del Gobierno de EEUU, y culpabilizar – una vez más- al Gobierno cubano.

**El abandono de los deportistas era festejado sin disimulo por varios diarios, que publicaban una fotografía de Fidel Castro,** años atrás, cuando felicitaba a uno de ellos (17). El mensaje de guerra –inequívoco- de esta foto lo llevaba a palabras el canal deportivo ESPN: La “deserción de los Gurriel da el tiro de gracia al béisbol en Cuba” (18).

Al margen del impacto de estos hechos en la crisis actual del béisbol cubano (19), hay algo ya indudable: que si algo recibió el tiro de gracia hace tiempo es el periodismo veraz y decente en los grandes medios internacionales.