Baseball and the U.S.-Cuban Diplomatic Relationship: Why did baseball serve as an ineffective diplomatic tool for the United States and Cuba?

Abbygale Sarah Martinen

University of New Hampshire, Durham, asi64@wildcats.unh.edu

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BASEBALL AND THE U.S.-CUBAN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONSHIP

Why did baseball serve as an ineffective diplomatic tool for the United States and Cuba?

Abbygale Martinen
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Introduction

“Within the context of an increasingly interconnected world there is little doubt that the global spectacle, commodity and cultural phenomenon that is modern sport influences, and is influenced by, politics and foreign policy.” (Jackson & Haigh, 2008, 349)

“The arena of sport potentially unites such otherwise divergent discourses. Regardless of political setting or ideological language, the game of baseball unites both entities under a singular framework of rules: the rules of baseball.” (O’Brien, 2008, 171)

Sport has a distinct ability to bring people together, from international events to intercity play to backyard games. The unifying aspects of sport have been illustrated time and time again: soccer has worked to bring homeless youth and adults out of poverty, high school rivalries unite schools and their communities, and the Olympic Games draw millions of viewers around the world in support of their home countries. Although the unifying nature of sport is most attributed to bringing together different cultures or different people within a specific culture, sport can also be used as a diplomatic tool between nations. The United States successfully used sport as a diplomatic tool in the early 1970s, when the exchange of table tennis players between the U.S. and the People’s Republic of China helped bolster diplomatic relations between the nations.\(^1\) Although the use of sport as a diplomatic tool has only been used once by the United States, the U.S. and its professional leagues wield a good deal of power across international boundaries. The

\(^1\) For more information regarding Ping-Pong Diplomacy, please visit https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ping-pong_diplomacy.
money brought in by and the expansiveness of professional sports in the U.S. is unmatched in any other country, which gives the U.S. leverage in regards to sport over everyone else.

With all of the power that the U.S. holds in regards to sport, it is surprising that the superpower has not used sport as a diplomatic tool more often. When looking at diplomatic situations from a sociocultural vantage point, sport has the ability to be a successful diplomatic tool for many countries, including the United States. Sport, particularly baseball, had the opportunity to be a successful diplomatic tool in regards to the relationship between the United States and Cuba. Since the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the relationship between the two countries has been icy at best, while baseball in both countries thrived. The question remains: why did baseball serve as an ineffective diplomatic tool for the United States and Cuba? The many actors in this situation-Cuba, the U.S., Major League Baseball, Cuban baseball players, and the society of both nations-all had different goals when it came to the U.S.-Cuban relationship, but they all had one thing in common: their love for baseball.

Baseball has thrived in the U.S. and Cuba since the mid 19th Century, but it has in each state\(^2\), for the most part, done so independently of the other. Although baseball serves as the national pastime for both states, historically neither state has used the sport as a tool of diplomacy with the other. The baseball community in both states met each other a few times over the course of their tumultuous relationship, but all of the actors in the situation failed to use these opportunities to strengthen the diplomatic relations.\(^3\) The United States and Major League Baseball (MLB) were in the best positions to use baseball as a diplomatic tool, but Cuba and Cuban baseball could have also stepped in. In this way, baseball did not fail to unify the two

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\(^2\) “State” will be used from here on to describe a political body and as a synonym for country or nation.

\(^3\) For information regarding baseball relations between the U.S. and Cuba please refer to section 5.
nations, but each of the diplomatic actors, failed to utilize baseball as the diplomatic tool that it could have been. The length of time that it took the United States and Cuba to begin working towards normalized diplomatic relations could have been shortened if baseball had been used as a diplomatic tool. Cuba and the U.S. did not begin to normalize diplomatic relations until an opportune political and cultural moment presented itself and sure enough, baseball was a part of it. This opportune moment could have happened many years earlier if all of the actors in the situation had worked together in regards to baseball, instead of overlooking the sport as a reliable diplomatic possibility.

This paper will explore the difficulties of the U.S.-Cuban relationship through the lens of baseball and how baseball could have positively affected diplomatic relations between the two states. The paper will begin with a history of relations between the U.S. and Cuba and the origins of baseball in both states. This information will help provide the necessary information in order to fully comprehend the remainder of the paper. The paper will then present a case study of several missed diplomatic opportunities, in which baseball could have been used to form a political, cultural, and diplomatic connection between the two states. The paper will end with a discussion of why sport diplomacy could have worked in the situation between the United States and Cuba and what other areas of research could have added to this analysis.

**History of U.S. / Cuban Relations**

This section will give a brief overview of the evolution of the state of U.S. - Cuban relations. The United States and Cuba have had an interesting relationship over the course of their existence. The state of Cuba began as a Spanish Colony for over 400 years (1492-1898) and was discovered by Christopher Columbus, who is also credited for discovering the “New World”. When the United States defeated Spain in the Spanish-American war in 1898, Spain
relinquished their claim to Cuba to the U.S. Tomas Estrada Palma was elected the first president of the independent state of Cuba in 1902. Although Cuba became independent, the U.S. government continued to hold the right to intervene in Cuban affairs when necessary through the Platt Amendment. Over the next 30 years, the U.S. government intervened numerous times in Cuban affairs, but the superpower abandoned its right to intervene in 1934 and even lifted some trade sanctions. (BBC) (Congressional Digest, 2013)

Before Fidel Castro successfully took control of Cuba in 1959, he led an unsuccessful revolt in 1953 against President Batista’s Cuban government. In 1956, Castro, aided by Ernesto “Che” Guevara, began a guerilla war against Batista’s government in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. In lieu of the impending civil war in Cuba, the U.S. withdrew military aid to Batista in 1958. The following year, Fidel Castro led a guerilla army into Havana and forced Batista to flee, giving Castro control of the Cuban government. In April of 1959, the United States unofficially accepted Castro’s control of Cuba after Vice President Nixon met with the communist leader on an informal visit to Washington, D.C. Although Nixon believed that the U.S. should accept Castro’s regime, Washington was forced to cut off all diplomatic relations and impose a trade embargo when Castro nationalized all remaining U.S. business on the island in 1960, without due compensation to U.S. companies. (BBC) This year marked the beginning of the diplomatic separation of the United States and Cuba, which would last for over 50 years.

Over the next half-century, the two countries battled ideologically, politically, and militarily. “In the early 1960s, U.S.-Cuban relations deteriorated sharply when Fidel Castro began to build a repressive communist dictatorship and moved his country toward close relations with the Soviet Union” (Congressional Digest, 2013, 5). While Castro believed his regime to be revolutionary and able to fix all of Cuba’s problems, the United States feared the consequences
of living and governing in close proximity to any form of dictatorship or communism. Fidel Castro ruled by decree from when he took power until 1976, when the Cuban government enacted a new constitution, creating the Cuban Communist Party. Under the new Cuban constitution, the Political Bureau, headed by Castro, held all political power while the National Assembly of People’s Power held all legislative authority (Congressional Digest, 2013).

There were many events between the United States and Cuba over the course of Castro’s 50-year reign that illustrated their hostile relationship. These included failed covert operations to overthrow the Cuban government ending with the Bay of Pigs in 1961, the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and the shooting of four U.S. crew members by Cuban fighter jets in February of 1994. The 1980 exodus of 125,000 Cubans and the 1994 exodus of 30,000 Cubans to the United States did not have a positive effect on the relationship between the two states either. (In 1994, the U.S. and Cuba signed an agreement that allowed the U.S. to admit 20,000 Cubans per year if Cuba halted the exodus of refugees.) United States policies also had a negative effect on the relationship with Cuba. In July of 1963, the U.S. Treasury Department issued the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR), which thrust early economic sanctions against Cuba. The CACR held all economic sanctions until the 1990s when the Cuban Democracy Act (CDA) (1992) and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (CLDSA) (1996) were passed. The CDA “prohibits U.S. subsidiaries from engaging in trade with Cuba and prohibits entry into the United States for any sea-borne vessel to load or unload freight if it has been involved in trade with Cuba within the previous 180 days,” (Congressional Digest, 2013, 32). The CLDSA was enacted in response to the shooting of two U.S. aircrafts in 1994 mentioned previously and essentially put in writing the Cuban embargo, which had unofficially been put in effect years earlier.
Cuba’s close relationship with the Soviet Union from 1960 to 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, had a negative effect on the relationship between the United States and Cuba as well. The United States and the Soviet Union were at two opposite poles of the Cold War, and Cuba’s relationship with the Soviet Union put it at odds with the United States. Before 1991, the Cuban economy relied heavily on the production of sugar on the island and the financial support of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it could no longer provide financial support to Cuba and the Cuban economy fell drastically. The Cuban government implemented market reforms in order to keep the economy from deteriorating more than it already had, but in response, the U.S. tightened the embargo. (BBC) Although during his time as President of the United States, Barack Obama worked tirelessly to normalize relations between the United States and Cuba including a lift of travel restrictions on family travel and remittances to Cuba and a move towards normalizing relations in 2016, the U.S. Congress has yet to lift the economic embargo on Cuba.

**Collapse of the Cuban Economy & The Effect on Cuban Baseball**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the Cuban economy was one of the major events that affected Cuban baseball and the baseball relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. Fidel Castro established the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC - Partido Comunista de Cuba) in 1965 and modeled his Communist government after the Soviet Union - socialist-style public property, central planning, and a limited market (Xianglin, 2007, 93). The limited market system implemented by Castro ultimately hindered the Cuban economy when the countries that it consistently relied upon could no longer provide assistance. Prior to the end of the Cold War, the Cuban economy relied heavily on the exports of sugar and sugar-related

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4 This event will be explored in greater detail in the following section.
products to countries that were part of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA/COMECON) (González, 2004, 50). “While relationships with the CMEA were crucial for Cuba’s sustainable economic development, this also limited the rationalization of the domestic economy and the healthy and diverse development of foreign trade,” (94). From 1985-1989, sugar accounted for 74.7% of total Cuban exports, which amounted to about 4.1 billion pesos (Pollitt, 1997, 172). The CMEA countries subsidized the Cuban economy by paying premiums for Cuban sugar exports, providing soft loans for Cuban machines, and importing raw materials (179). During this five-year period, CMEA countries accounted for more than two-thirds of Cuba’s total sugar exports (180).

Out of all of the CMEA countries, Cuba traded with and relied on the Soviet Union the most. The relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union was a key factor in the growth and stability of the Cuban economy until the 1990s; about three-quarters of Cuban imports came from the Soviet Union (Purcell, 1992, 131). With their special economic relationship, the Soviet Union overpaid Cuba for sugar, Cuba underpaid for oil, and Cuba acted as a political and military ally for the Soviet Union because of its close proximity to the United States (131). When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it could no longer provide support to Cuba, which sent the small island nation into an economic crisis. Castro proclaimed this period as Cuba’s “Special Period in a Time of Peace” (Purcell, 1992, 134; Xianglin, 2007, 95). During the Special Period, Cuban imports fell by 76% and sugar exports fell by 50.3% (Pollitt, 1997, 171-172). In monetary terms, “Cuban exports dropped from approximately 5.4 billion pesos in 1989 to 1.1 billion pesos in 1993, while imports plunged from 8.1 billion pesos in 1989 to 2.0 billion pesos in 1993” (Domínguez, 1997, 53-54).
The downward spiral of the Cuban economy had a direct effect on Cuban baseball and Cuban baseball players. In order to deal with the economic crisis, the Cuban government rationed goods and services and adjusted the costs of many lucrative items (González, 2004, 51). “As the Soviet economy began to unravel, Castro increasingly assumed regressive inward-looking policies as a course for Cuba’s economic and political survival,” (Purcell, 1992, 133). With all of Castro’s regressive policies, the production and supply of equipment needed to play baseball no longer could be a top priority for the Cuban government. Purcell (1992) asserted that the number of people trying to escape Cuba after the economic collapse was a sign of growing unhappiness of the Cuban people, which could include the influx of Cuban baseball players to the United States (137). Although Cuban baseball was merely amateur at this point in time, Cuban baseball players could barely afford to play in the amateur leagues let alone grow a professional system. The financial obstacle to baseball in Cuba could have been used as a turning point for Cuban-American relations. If the Cuban government had realized the cultural and financial commodity of their baseball players, if the United States had realized the same of MLB, and if the MLB and both governments had worked together to better both Cuban and American baseball, the diplomatic situation could have been much different. If the diplomatic actors had taken advantage of the financial situation in Cuba, the cultural aspects of baseball could have propelled the two states toward diplomacy.

Instead of any of the diplomatic actors taking this opportunity to utilize baseball, as Cuban military and economic power weakened, the hostility of the U.S. toward Cuba grew. When, “Cuba lost the military and economic backing of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s overseas military presence came to a near-instantaneous end,” and Soviet troops pulled out of Cuba in 1991 (Domínguez, 1997, 52-54). Although the withdrawal of Soviet troops illustrated the
lessening of the Cuban threat to the U.S., the northern power continued its ideologically based, hostile policies toward Cuba; focusing on the spread of democracy to non-democratic states (56). With the understanding that political grudges have the ability to last generations, the U.S. could have used this situation to promote its ideologically charged policies through baseball instead of continuing harsh economic sanctions on a state that was already hurting financially. Cuba, knowing that it was in deep economic trouble, could have used this opportunity to ask for help from the superpower to the north. Baseball could have been used to facilitate a cultural exchange if both states had set aside their ideological and political goals for a greater economic and cultural purpose. The next section will provide an overview of baseball in Cuba and the United States in order to effectively analyze the baseball relationship between the two states and illustrate how both governments and the baseball communities in the respective states failed to utilize the sport to help move toward normalized diplomatic relations.

**Origins of Baseball in Cuba and the United States**

**United States**

The game of baseball as we know it today originated in the Northeast part of the United States in the early to mid-1800s out of the bat and ball game of cricket. Amateur, unorganized, and neighborhood baseball was played for many years before the eventual creation of teams and leagues. The New York City Knickerbockers, established in 1845, are widely known as the first organized baseball club (Rosenberg), although some scholars assert that the New York Club came before the Knickerbockers (Adelman). Whether or not one team came before the other, the two clubs played the first documented American baseball game on June 19, 1846, at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey (Adelman). Before the creation of an association of baseball clubs, the Knickerbockers were “established as a ‘fraternal’ group of young men playing
impromptu intra-squad games, paying little attention to who won or lost the games but instead to promoting health, recreation, and social interaction” (Rosenberg, Date unknown, 2).

As the numbers of baseball clubs grew, an informal league formed in 1857. The direction of this league and the game of baseball were dictated by the Knickerbocker club. This amateur National Association grew from just 14 clubs in 1857 to over 300 in 1867. Amateurism became a thing of the past by 1870, with the National Association ruling of 1866, which stated that ball clubs could now pay their players for their services. Soon the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (NAPBBP) was created and began playing games on March 17, 1871. The NAPBBP only lasted five seasons but it helped give birth to the National League, which still exists today as part of Major League Baseball (MLB) (Rosenberg).

Cuba

Not long after baseball clubs began establishing themselves in the United States, the game traveled south to the island of Cuba. Most historians credit Nemesio Guilló (Guillót) for introducing Cubans to American baseball around 1860 (Turner, 2010). Guilló attended Springhill College in Mobile, Alabama in 1854, and returned to Cuba six years later with a baseball bat and a baseball. Guilló, along with his brother Ernesto, founded the Havana Base Ball Club in 1868 and served as the team’s right fielder. The first documented interaction of U.S. and Cuban baseball players occurred that year when Guilló’s club defeated American crewmen who were docked in Matanzas in 1868 (Turner, 2010). Some historians credit this event as the original birth of baseball in Cuba (Brown, 1984).

As Cuba was still under Spanish rule, baseball quickly became a symbol of independence and resistance. The lack of professional teams and the constant war in Cuba forced Esteban Bellan to join the Haymakers in 1869, a semi-professional team in the United States. Bellan
became the first Latin American player to play in a major league in the U.S. (Wikipedia). In an almost mirrored fashion to the United States, the Cuban Baseball League was founded within ten years and clubs began to compete for championships. Club Havana and Club Matanzas competed in the first official baseball game between Cuban teams on December 27, 1874, with Club Havana winning in a blowout (Brown, 1984).

For the next couple of decades amateur leagues in Cuba thrived and the Spanish-American War, which began in 1898, brought more opportunities to play American teams. By the turn of the 20th Century, Cuban teams began admitting black players into their league, decades before American baseball. American Negro League players spent their winters in Cuba beginning in the 1920s, as they were barred from American spring training leagues. The swift integration of Cuban baseball, “ultimately played a role in breaking the American ‘color line’ by providing the Brooklyn Dodgers with a place where they could bring Jackie Robinson to spring training in 1947” (Brown, 1984). White American players and teams also traveled to Cuba during the offseason in the early 1900s including big name players such as Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and Christy Mathewson and teams such as the New York Giants in 1900 and 1920 and the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1900 and 1941/42 (Turner, 2010).

In 1934, six teams played in the Cuban Baseball League and by 1940, there were 18 teams in total. By 1950, many Cuban baseball players worked in the sugar mills and played baseball on weekends and holidays as a distraction. One of the first professional teams in Cuba was the Havana Sugar Kings, which were an American AAA team. They were affiliated with the Cincinnati Reds, located in Havana, Cuba, and joined the International League in 1954. The team found success before the Cuban Revolution, when in 1959 they won the International League Playoffs and beat the Minneapolis Millers in the Junior League World Series. After the Cuban
After Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba, the communist government returned the professional league teams in Cuba back to amateur play. The leagues were reorganized based on a socialist model of sport because professional sport embodied the capitalist ideals that Castro worked very hard to keep out of Cuba. The end of professional baseball in Cuba brought the beginning of Cuban baseball players choosing to defect in order to play professional baseball. Rogelio Álvarez was the first Cuban baseball player to defect to the United States in 1963, although he debuted in the majors three years with the Cincinnati Reds earlier on September 18, 1960. It took another 20 years for the next Cuban baseball player, Bábaro Garbey, to defect to the United States and he debuted on April 3, 1984 with the Detroit Tigers (Wikipedia). The United States did not see any more Cuban defectors debuting in the MLB until the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Beginning in 1991, MLB began to see more and more players debuting across the league who had defected from Cuba to the U.S. The influx of players commenced with René Arocha in 1991, debuting in the MLB with the St. Louis Cardinals in April of 1993. Arocha “proved that Cuban players were of MLB quality, and [with] the fall of the Soviet Union [that] plunged Cuba into a ‘special period’ of unprecedented poverty, more defectors began to leak out” (The Economist, 2015). Many Cubans defected to the United States each year and began playing for MLB teams for the next two and a half decades. Some notable names include José Contreras of

Although it seemed like much of Cuba’s baseball talent was suppressed under Castro’s communist regime, forcing many to go abroad if they wanted to play, Castro admired the game of baseball as long as it remained amateur. According to The Economist (2015), Castro:

“proclaimed athletes to be ‘standard-bearers of the revolution playing for the love of the people, not money’. He banned professional sports and founded the National Series, a wildly popular amateur league in which each province fielded a team of players from its territory. He also established a formidable player-development system, with scouts identifying talented children and academies to train them once they became teenagers” (Para. 10).

Amateur leagues and player-development systems were not a new phenomenon when they were introduced in Cuba. Many other communist countries such as the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union used amateur sports to boost both public health and nationalistic fervor. The National Series and the Selective Series, Cuba’s top levels of amateur baseball, played at the AAA level and could compete with many professional teams in the United States. The Selective Series also produced Cuba’s National Team, which has competed internationally throughout Castro’s communist reign. By 1984, the Cuban National Team was looking forward to competing in exhibition games at the Olympics in Los Angeles and had already won ten World Series of Amateur Baseball championships and four gold medals at the Pan-American Games (Brown, 1984). Although it could be said that amateur baseball was thriving in Cuba
under Castro’s regime, many of Cuba’s talented players were leaving the island and began playing in the United States.

In present day, Cuban athletes are still handcuffed by many governmental restrictions on travel and working abroad. Although Cuba’s current President, Raúl Castro, has expressed interest and made strides in opening the economy and the state, defections of Cuban baseball players have continued. *The Economist* (2016) cites two reasons for continued defections: the fact that Cuban baseball players still are not necessarily “free” to go abroad and the influence of people who lived through the Cold War in the U.S. on government policy regarding Cuba and Cuban immigrants. “In 2013 Cuba said it would allow athletes to play professionally in foreign leagues-if they paid a 20% tax and returned for international tournaments and the winter National Series” (*The Economist*, 2016, para. 19). As the United States and Cuba have begun to normalize diplomatic relations, one can predict that the two states will be able to have even more positive relations in regards to baseball.

**Missed Diplomatic Opportunities**

The U.S., Cuba, Major League Baseball, and Cuban baseball missed many diplomatic opportunities that could have been taken throughout the course of their unstable relationship if baseball had been utilized as a serious diplomatic tool. These missed opportunities ranged from player and cultural exchanges to national team games to the ability of Cuban players to play for MLB teams. After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, there were five opportunities for baseball diplomacy between the U.S. and Cuba, which will be discussed in detail in this section. These events will illustrate how the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba could have changed for the better much earlier than it did if the actors had worked together using baseball as a means of diplomatic unity.
Endeavors Into Cuba By Major League Baseball In 1970s

After the success of Ping-Pong diplomacy in the early 1970s, Major League baseball took multiple steps in an effort to promote a cultural exchange through baseball between the U.S. and Cuba (Turner, 2010). Over the course of the 1970s, MLB executives attempted to convince the U.S. State Department many times of the need for a baseball exchange or any form of baseball relations between the U.S. and Cuba. According to Justin W.R. Turner (2010), “Using ping-pong [sic] diplomacy as a model, those hoping to improve U.S.-Cuba ties looked to baseball” (69). In May 1971, merely one month after the quoted success of Ping-Pong diplomacy, the manager of the San Diego Padres at that time, Preston Gomez, began searching for ways to take a team of all-star MLB players to Cuba for a goodwill mission. Gomez proposed his idea to the State Department⁶, but it was swiftly rejected (Turner, 2010).

A second attempt to convince the U.S. State Department of the need for baseball relations between the U.S. and Cuba was made in 1975, by MLB Commissioner Bowie Kuhn and Padres’ Manager Preston Gomez. Again the U.S. State Department, specifically Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, denied their request. Turner (2010) asserted, “Kissinger was open to improving the relationship between Washington and Havana, either through baseball or some other avenue, but he insisted on clear concessions from Cuba before anything could go forward” (70). Later that year, Kuhn and Gomez pressed the State Department for a third time. This attempt caused a rift and issues of communication within the State Department. An Undersecretary of State originally agreed with Major League Baseball, which gave MLB hope that the request would be granted, but Secretary of State Kissinger thwarted their plans once again. A fourth attempt in 1976 by

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⁶ The Secretary of State in 1971 was William P. Rogers, serving under President Richard Nixon from 1969-1973.
MLB never came to fruition due to the political ramifications of Cuba’s involvement in the Angolan civil war (Turner, 2010).

It did not take long for another MLB team and group of executives to challenge previous decisions made by the U.S. State Department in regards to traveling to Cuba. In 1977, the New York Yankees wanted to play a Cuban team in Cuba and asked the State Department for their support. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance supported the Yankees’ proposition and it might have happened if the politics of Major League Baseball did not get in the way. Even though MLB Commissioner Kuhn spent years lobbying for the Padres to play in Cuba, his opinion on the subject seemed to change. In this instance, Commissioner Kuhn stated that it was not fair to send a single MLB team to Cuba without providing the same opportunity to other MLB teams (Turner, 2010).

If you were keeping track, that makes five attempts to play baseball games in Cuba by Major League Baseball from 1971 to 1977. The U.S. Government and the Department of State blocked four of those attempts, while the final attempt was blocked by MLB internal politics. The attempts that were blocked by the Department of State failed due to the hard-lined stance of the U.S. Government in regards to Cuba (Turner, 2010). When the Cuban Government refused to make the concessions asked of them by the U.S. in order to pave the way for Major League Baseball to travel south, the U.S. refused to compromise. If the both the U.S. and Cuban governments had realized that baseball could have made a positive impact on their diplomatic relationship and took a different stance, a softened stance, toward each other, these events could have happened differently. These five failed attempts could have been a series of five exhibition games; five cultural exchanges that could have had a positive impact on the Cuban-American relationship.
Cuban Boycott of 1984 Summer Olympic Games

Although baseball was not featured as an Olympic medal sport from 1984-2008 (Wikipedia), many countries played exhibition games during non-medal years. The Cuban National Team was set to play in a series of exhibition games at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles (Brown, 1984). In The Atlantic (1984), Bruce Brown wrote, “Regardless of the outcome of the Olympics…the Cuban team’s games in this country offer an opportunity to glimpse intimate aspects of their national character” (114). This event was expected to be and could have been a step in the right direction between the U.S. and Cuba, if Communist international politics had not gotten in the way.

A group of fourteen Eastern Bloc countries, led by the Soviet Union, decided to boycott the Los Angeles games in response to the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Olympic games in Moscow. The boycott was initiated on 8 May 1984 by the USSR and Cuba became the eleventh country to join the boycott on May 24 (Wikipedia; Associated Press, 1984). The official reasoning touted by the USSR for the boycott was the commercialization of the games and the lack of security in the U.S. According to the Associated Press (1984), the decision by Cuba to join the boycott was made by the Cuban Olympic Committee, which claimed that the organization of the event violated Olympic regulations. “The [Cuban Olympic Committee’s] report quoted a committee statement as saying the ‘committee has proof that it is absolutely true that in organizing the Los Angeles Games, a series of irregularities and violations of Olympic regulations were committed,’” (Associated Press, 1984). If Cuba had attended the 1984 Olympic games, they were considered to be the best baseball team to play in the exhibition games (Associated Press, 1984).
This opportunity to use baseball as a diplomatic tool through an international cultural exchange was thwarted by Communist party politics. At this time in history, Cuba relied too much on the Soviet Union and was too entrenched in Soviet politics to be able to bring Cuban baseball to the United States. “In Los Angeles, Peter Ueberroth, president of [the] Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, called the Cuban pullout ‘a Soviet blockade of Cuban athletes who wanted more than anything to compete and excel in the 1984 Games,’” (Associated Press, 1984). While many had hoped that the Cuban participation in Olympic exhibition games, Cuba’s political and economic attachment to the Soviet Union proved too strong and stepped in the way of a positive relationship between the United States and Cuba.

**Cuban Success in International Baseball Competition**

Cuban baseball teams have been involved in international competition since baseball was introduced to Cuba in the mid-1800s. The dominance of international baseball competition by Cuban baseball teams began in the early 20th Century and continued for the next 75 years (Wagner, 1984). In 1959, “Amateurism, with state encouragement and support, was reemphasized, and Cuba began to dominate international amateur sports competitions, and continued its international dominance in baseball,” (Wagner, 1984, 115). By 1984, Cuba had won gold in the previous four Pan American Games (Brown, 1984). This unfounded success was significant because Cuban baseball players were almost entirely amateur and they were playing against semiprofessional and professional players from the United States and other Latin American countries. According to Wagner (1984), “Cuban baseball players are amateurs and are expected to work at a regular job. However, they are given time off from their job to play in the various series, and star players do seem to have more luxuries than normal Cuban workers,” (118). In 1984, “Many Cuban baseball stars made less than $2,000 annually, or one half of one
percent of the average New York Yankee’s salary,” (Brown, 1984, 109). In a communist country with a state-run economy, it might be surprising that Cuban baseball teams could be so successful in international competition, but Fidel Castro (like many other communist leaders) was a strong supporter of amateur sports (Wagner, 1984, 117).

Cuba did not see its first significant loss to an American team until 1987 in the preliminary round of the 1987 Pan American Games (Associated Press, 1999). Although Cuba lost to the U.S. in the preliminaries in 1987, they came back to beat the U.S. in the finals to take home the gold (Associated Press, 1999). From 1959-1980, Cuba finished first in six Central American Games, nine Pan American Games, and nine World Series of Baseball games (Wagner, 1984, 116). According to Wagner (1984), “During the years 1926-1974 Cuba’s record of 23 first places is more than the 15 first places gained by all the other countries combined,” (117). The next noteworthy loss to an American team in the Pan American games was in 1999 when the Cuban team lost to the United States in the preliminary round (Associated Press, 1999).

Cuba’s success in international play, especially in the Western Hemisphere, is notable because it illustrates that Cuban baseball teams could play at the same level as American baseball teams. This shows that even though the two countries were on different levels politically, economically, and socially, they could still compete on the same level when playing baseball games. Instead of finding a common ground in regards to baseball through international competition, both countries spent the latter half of the 20th Century arguing about their differences politically, economically, and socially.

1999 - Baltimore Orioles v. Cuban National Team

Major League Baseball and the Cuban National Team were able to find common ground through goodwill games during a home and home series in 1999. The Baltimore Orioles traveled
to Havana on March 28 to play in Cuba’s Estadio Latinamericano, while the Cuban National Team traveled to Baltimore on May 3 (O’Brien, 2008; Turner, 2010; Chass, 1999; Wikipedia). The Orioles won the first game in Havana and Cuba won the second game in Baltimore (Wikipedia). There was a chance that both of these games may not have happened, so the fact that both took place as scheduled could be considered a success. According to a New York Times article (1999), there was speculation that Cuba was going to pull out of the second game due to a fear of defections to the United States by players on their team (Chass). Cuban officials had been known for keeping a close eye on players during international competition in order to guard against defections, but it rarely came to the point of pulling out of games. Suspicions of player defection did lead to the suspension of a few players when the series traveled to the U.S., but that did not impede the Cubans from playing in the game (Chass, 1999).

Turner (2010) asserted that these events were the first baseball games that were produced as a result of sport diplomacy between the two states. Although the games in general were viewed as a success, many believed that “The shared love of baseball and the goodwill of athletic competition was an insufficient bandage for the lasting legacy of antagonism and mutual distrust between Washington and Havana” (Turner, 2010, 67). This quote demonstrates that even though the cultural and social aspect of these games brought the two baseball teams together, neither state was willing to take the next step towards a diplomatic resolution. While Cuba and the United States’ State Department allowed people-to-people contact through the cultural exchange of baseball (Lee, 2014), there was no unified effort by either state to use this moment to their diplomatic advantage.
2006 World Baseball Classic

In 2006, the United States attempted to prevent the Cuban National Team from participating in the inaugural World Baseball Classic (WBC); an international tournament modeled after soccer’s World Cup and held in three countries including multiple cities in the United States (O’Brien, 2008). The WBC “sought to create a truly ‘World’ Series [of baseball] by featuring round-robin play amongst teams from sixteen countries,” (O’Brien, 2008, 136). The United States originally did not approve of Cuba participating in the WBC due to decades of political conflict and the administration of President George W. Bush attempted to persuade the other participating countries to block Cuba’s participation in the tournament. The participating countries in Latin America were not pleased with President Bush’s efforts and threatened to boycott the games (O’Brien, 2008).

The United States government used this opportunity to assert their dominance over Cuba in the international political sphere. The political actors in this situation put the significance of the baseball exchange behind the significance of their own political power. O’Brien (2008) asserted, “Distinct parallels exist between Major League Baseball’s balk rule and the ‘rules’ of international foreign policy governing sovereign states,” (135).7 Due to the threatened boycott of the entire tournament by the Latin American countries, the United States eventually conceded and allowed Cuba to play in the tournament. Cuba’s international dominance that was seen in the 20th Century continued into the 21st Century with a second place finish, falling to Japan, in the championship game of the inaugural WBC (O’Brien, 2008, 137). The Cuban National Team’s celebrated homecoming after the 2006 WBC illustrated exactly how much value the Cuban placed on baseball and their team. “Upon Cuba’s return from a second-place finish at the WBC,

7 A balk is an illegal action by a pitcher as defined by Rule 6.02(a) of the 2016 Edition of Major League Baseball’s Official Rules Book.
the nation met the team with a parade to celebrate its - and the country’s - victory over the U.S.’s attempt to exclude them,” (O’Brien, 2008, 168). Cuba placed extensive value on the success of their baseball team in international competition. This information is something that both states and the baseball communities in each could have used if baseball had been utilized as a diplomatic tool.

Through the five previous case studies, it has been illustrated that the value Cuba has instilled in baseball over the course of the 20th and 21st Centuries has matched and could even exceed the value instilled by the United States. Cuba’s prolonged success in many different international baseball competitions demonstrated that Cuba could compete on a similar level to the United States. Even though baseball was influenced by the interconnectivity of politics and foreign policy, it is evident that baseball did not have enough power to influence the actors needed to change the politics and foreign policy of the United States and Cuba. O’Brien (2008) asserted, “Perhaps baseball can ignite a unifying political diplomacy,” (138). In reality, neither state could let go of their decades long ideological and political battle in order to utilize baseball as a unifying political and diplomatic force. The actors in this situation each had ample opportunities to attempt to use baseball to bring everyone together on to common ground. Instead of utilizing these opportunities, baseball remained a sport for teams to play and people to watch and enjoy.

**Why Sport Diplomacy Could Have Worked**

Diplomacy is defined as “the profession, activity, or skill, of managing international relations, typically by a country’s representatives abroad,” and “the art of dealing with people in a sensitive and tactful way,” (Oxford English Dictionary). In order to successfully manage international relations, state actors must have the ability to work with people in a sensitive and
tactful manner. One way to accomplish this is to appeal to something that is socially and culturally valuable within the society that you are attempting to build a relationship with. In the case of China and the United States in the 1970’s that something was Ping-Pong and in the case of the United States and Lebanon that something was basketball (Levermore, 2008). In these two examples, sport has been used to bring people of two different cultures and societies together as well as to bring together people within different sects of the same culture and society. Sport is essential to uniting different groups of people and has the ability to make a positive impact on diplomacy and international relations.

Not only can sport make a positive impact on diplomacy and international relations, but it also has the ability to serve as a tool for development and to lift developing societies and populations out of poverty. Sport gives underdeveloped populations something to work towards and something to live for. “What often binds these schemes together is a belief that sport can make a difference to improve standards of living,” (Levermore, 2008). Even though it has yet to be proven that sport can have a direct positive influence on the economic status of entire states, societies, or populations, the belief that it can pull developing populations out of poverty is a powerful force. If people believe that something is destined to happen, they will be more likely to act in ways that help fulfill said destiny. “Some groups want to take this relationship between sport and development further, calling for participation in sport to be enshrined as a human right that all should be free to enjoy,” (Levermore, 2008, 56). When sport is accessible to all populations, it can be a successful tool for diplomacy and development.

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8 According to Levermore (2008), “the U.S. Department of State has launched a ‘sports diplomacy initiative,’ part of which aims to facilitate the interaction of different section of Lebanese society through playing basketball, with the hope of lessening hostile perceptions of rival communities,” (60).  
9 Also known as a self-fulfilling prophecy.
When applying these ideas to the diplomatic situation discussed in this paper, it is evident that sport diplomacy, and specifically baseball, could have had a positive impact on the relationship between the United States and Cuba. There is a cultural and symbolic currency related to sport that wields immense power, which both the United States and Cuba could have utilized in developing their diplomatic relationship (Jackson & Haigh, 2008). Although these two states could have utilized sport as a positive diplomatic tool, it would have been difficult because they did not have much to compare it to. Jackson and Haigh (2008) assert, “throughout history and across the spectrum of international politics, examples that clearly demonstrate the use of sport in international relations abound - although explicit recognition of its role in foreign policy is admittedly rare,” (349). The previous section outlined many different opportunities created through baseball that the U.S. and Cuba could have used as a form of diplomacy, but neither state ever made an explicit recognition of baseball as a diplomatic tool.

Baseball has served as an important societal and cultural symbol for both the U.S. and Cuba for over a century, but the actors in this situation did not utilize baseball to its full potential as a form of diplomacy. Although sport has yet to be codified as a specific and reliable means of diplomacy, the strategy of using sport for diplomacy could have impacted the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba because of the collective identity that both states felt in regards to baseball. According to Jackson and Haigh (2008), “Sport has long served as an important source of collective identification and is perhaps one of the most powerful and visible symbols of national identity and nationalism,” (351). In this case of the U.S. and Cuba, both states formed their own national identities around baseball, but could not find a way to use baseball as a means to bring their national identities closer together. In a perfect world and based on the sociocultural
value that both states placed on baseball, the sport should have acted as a connection to bridge the diplomatic gap.

If baseball alone could not bridge the gap between the U.S. and Cuba, one would think that baseball accompanied by immigration concerns would force the U.S. and Cuba to communicate. Each year since the Cuban Revolution, thousands of Cuban citizens emigrate or attempt to emigrate to the U.S. and a small number of those immigrants end up playing baseball in the Major Leagues. As mentioned previously, Cuban defections to the U.S., especially those of Cuban baseball players, rapidly increased after the collapse of the Soviet Union and during Cuba’s economic crisis in the 1990s. According to Domínguez (1997), “The most important reason for US-Cuban contact and collaboration has been to cope with the effects of the migration flow…During Cuba’s economic crisis of the early 1990s, the pressure to emigrate built up,” (68). For a short time in August of 1994, the Cuban government stopped preventing Cuban citizens from fleeing the country, which led to 35,000 people leaving for the U.S. in a matter of a couple of weeks (Domínguez, 1997). If the sociocultural value that both states placed on baseball was not enough to bring them together, one might think that the issue of migration conflated by baseball might.

States have core interests vested across political and geographical boundaries, interests that can be pulled together and shaped through global sport. The United States and Cuba were too busy focusing on the issues that separated their two states, instead of the interests that they shared. One of these shared interests was both states’ love of baseball. According to academic literature on sport and foreign policy, “in order to respond to novel social, political, cultural and economic pressures, states are increasingly turning to sport as a foreign policy instrument; and they cannot ignore the corresponding influence that global sport has on their core interests,”
(Jackson & Haigh, 2008, 352). Unfortunately, the realization of sport as a diplomatic tool did not happen until a few years into the 21st Century. Based on the case studies outlined in the previous section, the U.S. and Cuba had many opportunities to make this realization much quicker than the academic community, which could have had a massive effect on diplomatic relationships across the globe.

Areas for Further Inquiry & Research

Although the bulk of this paper argues that Cuba and the United States could have used baseball and sport as a diplomatic tool throughout their tumultuous relationship, there still remain a lot of unanswered questions. There were many diplomatic actors in the various situations between the United States and Cuba, including the two governments, Fidel Castro, Major League Baseball, Cuban Baseball, individual baseball players, and possibly others not mentioned. Each of the actors had differing goals in regards to baseball and diplomacy. Questions that could not be answered with the research at hand involve exactly how much power did each of these actors wield, what the process was for Cubans who wanted to defect and whether they did so purely to play baseball, how the MLB recruited or scouted Cuban players if they did so and how players from other Latin American countries affected Cuban recruitment, and many more.

How much power did the Cuban baseball players have, especially those who might have looked towards playing professionally abroad? One might think very little due to the political nature of Cuba and the difficulty of traveling abroad. How much power did Major League Baseball have in terms of bringing Cuban players to the U.S., playing exhibition games, etc. and how much of their power did they actually utilize? One might think that the amount of money that the MLB had would give them a lot of power, but whether or not they actually used that
power in regards to Cuba is another issue. How much power did the U.S. and Cuba hold in regards to their diplomatic situation? During this time, the U.S. surely held more power in the global environment, but Cuba’s relationship with the Soviet Union and Castro’s communist regime provided an enormous threat to the U.S. way of life.

The next question that could not be answered is in regards to defections of Cuban baseball players. MLB saw a multitude of players defect from Cuba to the U.S., especially after the Cuban economic crisis. What was the process of Cuban baseball players defecting to the U.S.? Was the process different than any other Cuban citizen that wanted to defect? Were political motives behind Cuban baseball players that defected or were defections solely based on their drive to play professional baseball? It is evident that these questions surrounding player motives and defection processes could only be answered through direct interviews and talking with the players, coaches, and front office personnel that actually went through the process. This is a great topic for further research, but something that could not be done with current resources.

The last question for further research involves the recruiting and scouting strategies of Major League Baseball in regards to Cubans and other Latin American players. How did MLB scouts find and recruit talented Cuban baseball players? With an economic embargo and travel ban placed on Cuba by the U.S., it would be interesting to know how baseball executives got around the many restrictions between the two states. Once MLB baseball executives scouted Cuban players, how did the number of Cuban players in the MLB compare to those of other Latin American countries? Was it easier for MLB scouts to recruit other Latin American players than Cuban players? Did anything other than baseball skill motivate MLB to seek players from other countries? Without a seat at the table when MLB personnel make decisions, it is difficult to ascertain their motives and how they scout/recruit foreign players.
Current State of U.S.-Cuban Baseball Relations

Cuban political and economic reform, evolving public opinion, and the game of baseball have all helped the United States and Cuba move towards normalize diplomatic relations. Upon assuming his presidency, Raul Castro exclaimed, “We reform, or we sink” (Sweig & Bustamante, 2013, Para. 10). In the mid-2000s, Raul Castro realized that in order for his country to survive in the globalized world, the state must initiate comprehensive economic and social reforms. One of these reforms included a new migration law, which eliminated exit permits, allowed previous Cuban defectors to visit the country and have the ability to repatriate, and expanded the amount of time that a Cuban citizen could legally live in a different country (Ibid). The public-private, hybrid economy of modern Cuba has yet to bring real economic growth to the state, which has forced its highly educated population to immigrate to other countries such as the United States (Ibid). Cubans that do immigrate and live abroad send home remittances to help their family members who remain on the island. “At an estimated $1 billion a year, remittances have been big business since the late 1990s, helping Cubans compensate for low salaries and take advantage of what few opportunities have existed for private enterprise” (Sweig & Bustamante, 2013, Para. 21). As the Cuban government evolves and more Cubans immigrate to the United States, American views towards Cuba and the relationship between the two states in regards to baseball have evolved as well.

On March 22, 2016, the Tampa Bay Rays of Major League Baseball played an exhibition game against the Cuban National Team at the Estadio Latinamerico in Havana, Cuba. The game took place only a day after the first bilateral meeting between the United States and Cuba, when then-President Barack Obama and Cuban President, Raul Castro, met in Cuba. This was the first time in almost 90 years that a sitting U.S. President traveled to Cuba (Rhodan, 2016).
The game took place on the very field that Jackie Robinson played on before breaking the color barrier and it was attended by President Obama, President Castro, and Rachel Robinson (Jackie Robinson’s wife). President Obama gave a speech before the game commenced:

*For all of our differences, the Cuban and American people share common values in their own lives. A sense of patriotism and a sense of pride--a lot of pride. A profound love of family. A passion for our children, a commitment to their education... But we cannot, and should not, ignore the very real differences that we have--about how we organize our governments, our economies, and our societies... Despite these differences, on December 17th 2014, President Castro and I announced that the United States and Cuba would begin a process to normalize relations between our countries. The history of the United States and Cuba encompass revolution and conflict; struggle and sacrifice; retribution and, now, reconciliation.* (Obama, 2016)

The Rays ended up beating the Cuban National Team 4-1, but the event overall was a great example of sport diplomacy and how baseball could have had a positive affect on the U.S.-Cuban relationship.

Currently there are 27 Major League Baseball players from Cuba playing in the United States, and collectively they earn about $100 million (*The Economist*, 2015). As mentioned earlier, much like other Cubans living abroad, a lot of this money is sent back to Cuba in remittances to family still living on the island. With the growing number of Cuban baseball players in MLB teams and the move toward normalized diplomatic relations between the two states, both states have expressed interest in a better system for playing baseball. “Both MLB and the Cuban government now say they want a ‘normalised’ system, in which Cuban athletes can travel to America legally and safely, play for MLB teams on a work visa and return home in the
off-season” (*The Economist*, 2015, Para. 20). This would be beneficial for both the U.S. and Cuba, because Cuban baseball players could play in the U.S. legally, positively affect MLB teams and the American perception of Cubans, and then have the ability to go back to Cuba and remain a Cuban citizen.

Although it is extremely difficult to change longstanding policy in both countries, both Cuba and the United States have taken steps in the right direction, both for diplomacy and for the game of baseball. President Obama asserted that U.S. policy towards Cuba has not been working and that the result will not change if we attack the situation the same way every time (Leogrande, 2015). Baseball diplomacy has always been an option, but it was never truly utilized by any of the actors as a unified tool for diplomacy. “Initially, Washington hoped that isolation, economic denial and CIA paramilitary attacks would topple Cuba’s young revolutionary government,” (Leogrande, 2015, 475). Unfortunately, Washington’s hard-lined policy only hurt the relationship between the United States and Cuba. Engagement and cooperation through baseball could and will always help diplomatic relations between the two states.

**Conclusion**

Today, many Cuban baseball fans crowd into smoke-filled bars and hotel restaurants in order to see their favorite Major League Baseball teams play on television. Others filter into secret locations and stream illegal satellite broadcasts of MLB games on decades old television sets (*The Economist*, 2015). In one instance, “they are rooting for the Royals because of the team’s first baseman, Kendrys Morales, who fled Cuba on a raft in 2004 after serving several stints in jail for his seven previous failed escape attempts,” (Ibid, Para. 4). These Cubans risk extensive punishment in order to see their favorite hometown baseball players on television. Their love for the game of baseball is not unique to Cuba and can be found in bars, stadiums, and
homes throughout the United States. Sport unites people of all different backgrounds, political ideologies, social classes, and empowers people in all different communities. Sport is inherently part of everyday life and thus should be utilized as a diplomatic tool in international relations.

Sport is one of the greatest, most underutilized tools for diplomacy and development. The social and cultural symbols of sport, and in this case baseball, have the ability to bring people of all cultures, backgrounds, and nations together through a common bond. Sport will only bring people together if it is used for such a purpose. Jackson and Haigh (2008) assert, “it is us who are the tools of sport,” (356) and sport will only help bridge gaps when realize its full potential. Tools will only work if we use them to our advantage; something that was not considered in the situation between the United States and Cuba. Baseball was never leveraged by any of the actors in the situation between the United States and Cuba, which means that it could never have been successful at bridging the cultural and societal divide between the two.

Within the last 50 years, many different opportunities for baseball diplomacy presented themselves between the United States and Cuba. Each of these opportunities consisted of some form of baseball and/or cultural exchange, which could have been utilized for baseball diplomacy by either state. None of the state or non-state actors truly attempted to employ baseball as a means for diplomacy. The actors who held power in these situations fell short of bringing these two states together through baseball diplomacy. Furthermore, Cuba and the United States failed to waiver on their hard-lined political stance towards each other. Sport can only influence politics and foreign policy if every actor in the situation is committed to utilizing sport as a tool for such influence. Unfortunately, baseball merely remained a game between two teams, instead of reaching its full potential as a bridge between two states.
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