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Introduction

Around the Horn

George Gmelch and Daniel A. Nathan

The way baseball is played in Cuba, Japan, and Australia looks much like how the game is played in the United States. The players use the same gloves and bats, wear similar uniforms, and play by the same basic rules. But beneath the outward similarity there is usually a very different history and culture influencing the sport’s nuances. Even how players and their fans think about the game and what they value are not the same. As journalist turned baseball executive Joseph A. Reaves notes about baseball in Asia, “It can look so similar and somehow feel so different.”¹ Like others, we are interested in those similarities and differences, about how the game is played and what it means around the world.

This book is an updated and expanded version of the first edition of Baseball without Borders. It examines the game’s history and current status in six more countries than its predecessor. There are new chapters about baseball in Finland, Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Venezuela, and the Australian state of Tasmania. Many of the original chapters have been significantly revised.

The essays in this new and expanded collection explore baseball in nineteen nations, Tasmania, and Puerto Rico (a U.S. territory). The essays are diverse not only in the settings and cultures they describe, but also in the perspectives adopted by their authors, who range from anthropologists to historians, from journalists to English professors, with a few independent scholars and a coach as well. The essays are also
diverse because we placed few restrictions on what the contributors chose to write about. We suggested some topics, such as the origins of baseball in the country they examined, its development, how local versions of the game differ from that played in the United States, and how the World Baseball Classic (WBC) has impacted baseball in the countries about which they are writing. In the main, though, the contributors were free to write about whatever aspects of the sport they thought American baseball fans (the intended audience) would find interesting. Some of the essays deal exclusively with the professional game abroad, while some, especially where there is not a strong professional league, also look at amateur baseball.

As before, we have organized the essays geographically. The countries in each region—the Americas, Asia, the Pacific, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe—share similarities in history and culture that have resulted in some parallels in the origins, development, and local versions of baseball found within them.

The collection begins with the Americas, with a chapter by writer Tim Wendel about Cuba, where baseball is widely loved and “has been closely linked with the causes of national independence and revolution since the days of José Martí.” Baseball arrived in Cuba in the 1860s, introduced by students returning from the United States. Folklore credits Nemiso Guillén for bringing the game to Cuba, when he returned from Springfield College in Mobile, Alabama, with a bat and baseball in his trunk. American sailors helped spread the game by playing with locals in Cuban ports. The game also got a lift from visiting American barnstormers in the 1870s. Just as the Japanese were responsible for spreading the game through Asia, Cubans became the apostles of baseball in parts of the Caribbean.

In “Cuba: The Curtain Begins to Fall,” Wendel takes us on a personal journey across the island’s baseball landscape. Along the way he examines the inflated claims that Fidel Castro was a genuine prospect (he wasn’t) as well as the Cuban revolution’s considerable impact on the island’s national pastime. Thanks to Wendel’s interactions with
local fans, we learn about their thirst for information about the Major Leagues, particularly what American baseball looks like, as few Cuban fans have access to TV or other images of American games and ballparks. He also reflects on the pride that many Cubans take in their countrymen—such as Yoenis Cespedes and Aroldis Chapman—who have made the arduous journey to the United States and succeeded in the Major Leagues, just before the Obama administration announced a renewal of diplomatic relations with the island nation.

The next chapter is by anthropologist Alan Klein and is about the Dominican Republic, where baseball is sometimes described as “a national fever.” No other aspect of Dominican life, except perhaps merengue, has provided as much joie de vivre in this Caribbean country as has baseball. As Klein ably documents in his books *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* (1991) and *Dominican Baseball: New Pride, Old Prejudice* (2014), the development of Dominican baseball is closely tied to sugarcane. Early on baseball became a diversion for cane workers during their breaks from the sugar fields, and sugar factory managers organized many of the first leagues. In “Dominican Republic: From Paternalism to Parity,” Klein explores the Dominican Republic’s impressive rise to international baseball prominence. After a brief review of the history of baseball in the country, Klein turns to the ways talented local youths are developed into pro prospects. These center on the baseball academies set up by Major League Baseball (MLB) teams to train Dominican youths and the network of buscónes, or amateur scouts, who locate, nourish, instruct, and then place young prospects with a Major League organization (in exchange for a slice of the prospect’s signing bonus). Klein also examines the transnational relationships between Dominican and American baseball. Where some observers have viewed this relationship in mostly exploitative terms, Klein shows that while North American interests dominated Dominican baseball in the 1950s and 1960s, severely crippling the local Dominican professional league, relations have become more reciprocal, approaching parity.
In “Puerto Rico: A Major League Stepping-Stone,” Franklin Otto and Thomas E. Van Hyning write from the perspective of fans who grew up on the island watching Puerto Rico Winter League baseball in its heyday. They survey the early development of Puerto Rican baseball (Cubans probably brought the game to the island, and soon thereafter U.S. military and civilian personnel helped it thrive) and then turn to the PRWL, where many fine U.S. and Caribbean Major League players spent their winters in the six-team league. In operation since 1938, the PRWL was in danger of folding in the early 1990s, in part because many homegrown stars no longer wished to return home to play—as Major Leaguers they had large salaries and didn’t need the money, and their American teams didn’t want them to risk injury. Today, a new generation of Puerto Rican stars is playing in the former PRWL, which is now a five-team league called the Liga de Béisbol Profesional Roberto Clemente (Roberto Clemente Professional Baseball League). They want to honor their country and let their fans, many of whom will never travel to the United States, see their heroes in person.

Not all baseball-playing nations in the Americas trace the game back to the United States. In “Canada: Internationalizing America’s National Pastime,” historian Colin Howell cites evidence that baseball in Canada may have developed on its own, independent of the United States. After World War II the game was widely supported by Canadians. Earlier, though, baseball’s reputation for rowdiness, gambling, and drinking turned away members of the Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie, whose class, race, and nativist prejudices caused them to prefer curling, cricket, tennis, and golf. It is notable that Howell is the only one in this volume to discuss women and baseball. Canada had its own organized women’s baseball leagues, and about 10 percent of the women who played in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (1943–54), the wartime creation of Chicago Cubs owner Phil Wrigley, were Canadian. Wide ranging, Howell’s chapter also discusses Canadian Major League Baseball teams and players and the country’s successes and failures in international competition.
Baseball has a long tradition immediately south of the U.S. border, too. In his chapter “Mexico: From Humble Beginnings to Budding Competitor,” historian Jorge Iber demonstrates that while fútbol (soccer) is the national game, baseball’s place in the country’s sporting life is significant. As is true of many places around the world, Iber writes that baseball’s “earliest proponents came from the United States (military personnel and individuals associated with corporations) and exiled Cubans.” Likewise, the game became entwined with “the development of Mexican nationalism” and signified “modernity during the Porfiriato era.” Probably no single individual contributed more to Mexican baseball’s rise than impresario Jorge Pasquel, who in the 1940s and early 1950s elevated professional baseball in Mexico and aggressively pursued Cuban and Negro League players, and later white Major Leaguers, with mixed results. “While Pasquel’s raid on Major League players did not break the infamous reserve clause or overcome the yanqui owners,” Iber asserts, “his endeavors set in motion trends that would eventually help open the door to African Americans and Latinos and to free agency in the United States.” In the more than half century since then, scores of Mexicans have played in the Major Leagues (including the iconic pitcher Fernando Valenzuela, who inspired “Fernandomania” in the United States in 1981), the Mexican League has survived, and the Mexican national team has become competitive in international competition.

The latter cannot be said of baseball in Nicaragua, which has experienced many social and political upheavals and changes since writer Dan Gordon first visited it in 1988. In his significantly revised chapter, “Nicaragua: In Search of Diamonds,” based in part on his return trip to the impoverished country in 2003, Gordon finds that baseball’s popularity in Nicaragua has ebbed and flowed and varies according to place and region. By some measures, soccer has eclipsed baseball. Unlike in the past, Gordon observes, “sports bars broadcast European soccer games, and it is more common to see people in the street wearing Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo jerseys than donning baseball
gear. The pickup game of preference has also been soccer because in congested barrios it is less complicated and less expensive to play.” Nevertheless, Gordon demonstrates that baseball has retained much of its cultural resonance in the formerly war-torn country, which is now one of the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Drawing on interviews (including with former Major League pitcher Dennis “el Presidente” Martínez) and reportage, Gordon examines the game at its highest and grassroots levels, as well as its long history. Importantly, Gordon illustrates how baseball is inseparable from Nicaraguan society and politics. In Nicaragua, he explains, “the tentacles of Pinolero politics and sports are wrapped so tightly around one another that it’s challenging at times to distinguish one from the other.”

Arturo J. Marcano and David P. Fidler’s chapter suggests the same is true in Venezuela, a country in the throes of political and socioeconomic crises. In “Venezuela: The Passion and Politics of Baseball,” Marcano and Fidler note that, while Venezuelans are passionate, the game’s history and contemporary status are complicated, especially in light of MLB’s aggressive policies and practices and the wide-ranging effects of and responses to globalization. In the past twenty-five years, the number of Venezuelan Major and Minor Leaguers has greatly increased, and “Venezuela was integrated into MLB’s increasingly globalized business model, which involved securing cheap foreign talent and expanding consumer interest in MLB’s products (for example, broadcast games and team merchandise).” What is good for MLB, however, may not be so good for Venezuelan baseball, Venezuelans, and the country itself. Marcano and Fidler, and others, are concerned about MLB teams violating the human rights of children and that MLB has dictated and restricted the terms of MLB player participation in Venezuela’s Winter League in ways that potentially hurt the teams’ quality, performance, fan support, and revenue. These and other developments have weakened Venezuela’s “baseball institutions, economy, and culture,” write Marcano and Fidler. “In Venezuela,” they argue, “baseball is becoming more than a way to escape poverty; it has become a way to get out of
the country entirely.” Long term, this kind of talent drain does not bode well for Venezuela.

Brazil is the southernmost nation in the Western Hemisphere to play baseball. Yet Brazilian baseball is unique not because of its geography but because of who plays it. Although introduced by visiting American workers in the early 1900s, baseball was actually developed by Japanese immigrants. For many years, the Brazilian Japanese community has embraced the sport, and the style of Brazilian play is closer to the Japanese game than to the Latin or North American game. In “Brazil: Baseball Is Popular, and the Players Are (Mainly) Japanese!” Brazilians Carlos Azzoni and Tales Azzoni, an economist and journalist, respectively, and American Wayne Patterson, a computer scientist and university administrator, examine this anomaly in baseball demography as well as baseball’s place in a country much better known for its soccer dominance. Thanks in part to the leadership of Jorge Otsuka and MLB’s support and input, Brazil has started to produce Major Leaguers—such as Yan Gomes, Andre Rienzo, and Paulo Orlando—and has competed in the World Baseball Classic.

Part 2 comprises five essays about baseball in Asia, with two on the Japanese game, both of which are significantly different from those in the first edition of this book. In Japan baseball is not a postwar General MacArthur–inspired American import, as some American baseball fans think. It was introduced in 1867 by a young American teaching at a Tokyo university. Baseball became popular among schoolboys and eventually won recognition from the government for its educational and health benefits.

In “Japan: ‘No Matter What Happens, Stand Up,’” Dan Gordon reveals the unique characteristics of Japanese high school baseball and the all-Japan national tournament at Kōshien. Far more than a mere sport, Japanese high school baseball is a philosophy and an educational tool. It is considered a spiritual discipline that teaches many of the values that define the Japanese Bushido tradition of teamwork, dedication, discipline, and respect. Gordon also notes an unhealthy side
to Japanese high school ball, which sometimes includes hazing, corporal punishment, and excruciating and occasionally abusive training methods—activities that would not be tolerated in an American high school. Revisiting Japan after the devastating 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, Gordon finds that Japanese high school baseball, like some of the country itself, has undergone changes, yet many Japanese simultaneously yearn for the stability and comfort afforded by one of its most cherished sporting traditions.

In “Japan: Professional Baseball Enters the Twenty-First Century,” Yale University anthropologist William W. Kelly examines Nippon Professional Baseball, which has two leagues, the Central League and the Pacific League. He considers the NPB’s history and current organizational structures and practices, its place in Japanese society, and the ways in which it differs from Major League Baseball. Some of the differences are significant. Infields in most Japanese stadiums are composed solely of dirt, the games are slower, players’ careers are shorter, the salary range is more compressed (with a smaller income gap between superstars and journeymen), and the rosters are larger because teams do not have much of a minor league system. It is this version of the game, and not the great American game, that has diffused across Asia. Yet even in Japan, where baseball obviously has deep roots, the game is facing serious challenges. Kelly notes that Japan’s “rapidly aging and shrinking national population, a digital media revolution, the rising popularity of soccer, the threat of asset stripping from MLB, and the demands of the World Baseball Classic” have had a deleterious effect on NPB. “Baseball has yet to be displaced as the center sport in contemporary Japan,” Kelly explains, “but the domestic professional leagues are under serious assault by baseball elsewhere, by soccer and other sports, and by the inexorable dynamics of an aging and shrinking society and troubled economy.”

In “Korea: Straw Sandals and Strong Arms,” Joseph A. Reaves, who covered Asia for the Chicago Tribune for many years and later covered the Chicago Cubs for four seasons, charts the development of Korean
baseball. Although a U.S. missionary first introduced baseball to Korea in the 1870s, it was the Japanese occupiers who spread the game. The colonial authorities promoted baseball as part of their plan to indoctrinate Korean youth with Japanese ways. Much like in Taiwan, Koreans first adopted the game as a way to peacefully challenge the oppressors, but it later became a way to impress outsiders. Reaves also shows how a government, threatened by a restive population, used baseball as an opiate. Indeed, one of the primary objectives of the Korean Baseball Organization in the 1980s was to divert the public’s attention from politics to sports—to find an outlet for its restless and often rebellious young men.

In “China: A Century and a Half of Bat Ball,” Reaves recounts the erratic history of baseball in China. Surprisingly, baseball was played in China as early as 1863, a decade before the first game in Japan. However, the game did not take root until much later. In nineteenth-century China, baseball was best known for the role it played in the cancellation of China’s first and most ambitious educational exchange with the United States. Many of the 120 Chinese students sent to the United States in 1872 to learn the best of Western science and engineering developed a fondness for baseball, along with some other Western habits. When Chinese conservatives reported the students’ transgressions back to the Imperial Court, the mission was canceled and the students were called home. Baseball then languished until the early 1900s, when many Chinese students began studying in Japan and became reacquainted with baseball, Japan’s major collegiate sport. Baseball then gained a small following in China until the Cultural Revolution (1961–74), when the game was dismissed as a symbol of Western decadence. Across China zealous Red Guards ridiculed and sometimes persecuted players and coaches, and international competitions were no longer held. After the Cultural Revolution the game made a comeback and was even extolled by Chinese leaders for its benefits in military training (for example, it teaches soldiers how to throw hand grenades more accurately). At times reviled, at times exalted, baseball survived these upheavals.
Baseball arrived in Taiwan in 1897, shortly after the Japanese colonized the island. First played by Japanese youth, mostly at school, it was later adopted by Taiwanese boys and was an acceptable setting in which Taiwan’s colonized population could interact and compete with the Japanese. “Taiwan: Baseball, Colonialism, Nationalism, and Other Inconceivable Things” is by historian Andrew Morris, who lived two blocks from the baseball stadium in Taizhong while doing research for his doctoral dissertation. He became a die-hard fan of the President Lions and eventually became interested in questions of colonialism, nationalism, and ethnic identity in Taiwan’s national game, questions he addresses in his essay.

Many American readers will recall Taiwan’s unparalleled Little League success (ten Little League World Series titles between 1969 and 1981 and seventeen altogether). Morris examines the role of these championships in developing national pride and promoting nationalism. Morris is particularly interested in the interplay between local and international dimensions of Taiwanese baseball. The popularity of the Chinese Professional Baseball League, for example, has depended on maintaining a balance between respect for local Chinese tradition and the international (for example, allowing foreigners to play in its league). The league lost much of its fan support in the 1990s, when it allowed so many foreign players (up to ten per team) that the native Taiwanese players were pushed out of the starring roles.

Part 3 is about baseball in the Pacific, specifically in mainland Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand. In his chapter “Australia: Baseball’s Curious Journey,” Rick Burton, a professor of sport management, considers baseball’s history in the Land Down Under, which can be traced to the late nineteenth century. Over the years Americans, such as the famed (and well-traveled) sports equipment entrepreneur Albert G. Spalding, tried to promote baseball in Australia, with mixed results. The game has long had Australian devotees, Burton explains, yet it has always had a difficult time competing with already entrenched Aussie sports such as cricket, soccer, rugby, swimming, and Australian
Rules football. Still, baseball in Australia has endured, and the country has produced more than two dozen MLB ballplayers (including a few All-Stars), hosted MLB games in Sydney, and competed in the World Baseball Classic.

One of Australia’s six states, Tasmania is an island south of mainland Australia, with a population of just over a half million. In his chapter “Tasmania: Baseball Struggles to Survive,” George Gmelch, who has directed anthropology field schools in Tasmania, observes that historically the game has experienced “short periods of enthusiasm among a small group of followers, followed by waning interest and decline.” The baseball Tasmanians play is decidedly grassroots, never having become ingrained in the culture. There are few playing fields, and the talent, at best, does not exceed that of U.S. high school baseball. Major League Baseball holds little interest to Tasmanians. As Gmelch notes, Tassie baseball is more social than competitive, and “having fun rather than beating your opponent is what counts.” At the same time, the mainstay Hobart Summer Baseball League is doing its best to promote the game and bring institutional stability to Tasmanian baseball.

Much smaller than Australia, New Zealand shares a similar Anglo-influenced history, yet the two island nations have notably different cultures, including sporting traditions and preferences. In “New Zealand: Baseball between British Traditions,” historian Greg Ryan documents that baseball has been played in New Zealand since the 1880s. It has never, however, been widely popular. As in Australia, in New Zealand British games such as cricket and especially rugby were well established and incorporated into the local culture before baseball arrived. But this did not deter some Kiwis from embracing the game and establishing the Wellington Baseball Club in 1888. Over the next century, Ryan shows, baseball, always a minor sport, persisted in small pockets of Aotearoa (the Māori name for the country). For reasons that are unclear, softball took hold in the 1930s, and New Zealand has consistently done well in international softball competitions. Since the 1990s, partly due to “globalization and diversifying sport and lei-
sure patterns,” some New Zealanders have become “more receptive to American and other non-British sports,” baseball among them. The establishment of Baseball New Zealand, the national governing body for the sport, is one example of this increased interest. So, too, is the fact that the national team’s world ranking has dramatically improved and several New Zealanders have played professionally in the U.S. Minor Leagues.

Part 4 is about the Middle East, where baseball has barely taken root, other than in Israel, which has close links to the United States, has pioneered numerous irrigation technologies, and has three main baseball fields. In “Israel: From the Desert to Jupiter . . . and Beyond,” marketing and communications scholar William Ressler focuses on the values that baseball represents to many Israelis and how the Israel Association of Baseball administers and promotes the game. Still in its infancy (the first real baseball field in Israel was built in 1979), Israeli baseball represents chevreman culture, Ressler argues, that is, it embodies connections between and among people, collaboration, and good cheer. To many Israelis, even those on the 2012 Senior National Team—which included several “heritage players,” such as then Minor Leaguer Joc Pederson—who competed to qualify for the WBC, baseball is still primarily a game, rather than a big business or a lucrative profession to which one might aspire. Clearly an admirer, Ressler is impressed with the “resilient and rejuvenating character of baseball in Israel” and is hopeful about the game’s future in Eretz Yisrael.

Part 5 also deals with a single country but in the vast region of an entire continent. Marizanne Grundlingh’s “South Africa: The Battle for Baseball” considers several aspects of the game: its historical origins in South Africa (which are not exclusively American, for Japanese sailors were responsible for introducing baseball in the Eastern Cape), its racially bifurcated development during the turbulent apartheid years, and its contemporary struggles in a multicultural nation whose sporting passion is primarily devoted to rugby, soccer, and cricket. As is the case in many countries, baseball is “a minor sport in South
Africa,” Grundlingh acknowledges, yet for many of its thousands of players, coaches, administrators, and fans it is nonetheless meaningful. An anthropologist, Grundlingh has done fieldwork with the Bothasig Baseball Club in Cape Town that highlights how the game contributes to local community identity. Internationally, the South African national team has competed in the Olympics (2000) and the World Baseball Classic (2006 and 2009), without much success, as one would expect considering the elite competition. Yet as Grundlingh demonstrates, “Baseball offers those who play the game in South Africa an athletic identity and sense of belonging to a small but growing and passionate” baseball community.

Part 6 contains essays on four European countries. Peter Carino, a former English professor, views the Italian game from the vantage point of a fan in the stands in “Italy: No Hot Dogs in the Bleachers.” He usually doesn’t have a lot of company, though, because, as elsewhere in Europe, Italian baseball is not popular outside its small coterie of devoted followers. In the bel paese, Carino writes, baseball is “a ‘boutique sport,’ about as popular as professional lacrosse in the United States,” appreciated by those with discerning taste. Most regular-season games draw fewer than a thousand spectators. Italy is considered the strongest European baseball country, although the Netherlands has won more European Championships. Carino reports that the gap between the strongest and the weakest teams and players is considerable. The teams at the bottom, for example, can go an entire season without winning a single game, while league champion teams often win 80 percent of their contests, often thanks to former professional ballplayers from the United States.

In “Holland: An American Coaching Honkbal,” Harvey Shapiro describes the baseball scene in the Netherlands from a perspective unique in this volume. Shapiro, a veteran American college baseball coach, was hired to manage a club team in the Dutch National League (the Amstel Tigers) and later became the head coach of the Dutch National Team. Shapiro gives us a good sense of how Dutch amateur
baseball games and players are different from those in the United States. In recounting his experiences as manager of the Dutch National Team, he reveals much about international competition, particularly the European and World Baseball Championships.

In Britain, the birthplace of baseball pioneer Henry Chadwick, baseball must compete with its distant relative, cricket, for attention. In “Great Britain: Baseball’s Battle for Respect in the Land of Cricket, Rugby, and Soccer,” writer and former ballplayer Josh Chetwynd charts the rocky development of the sport, beginning with Spalding’s 1889 exhibition game at Kennington Oval in London, through the twentieth century (when several baseball leagues were established, all of which failed), and up to the present. Even more so than in Italy and Holland, baseball is a minor sport in Great Britain, sometimes dismissed by Brits as a glorified American version of rounders, a children’s game. Still, Chetwynd demonstrates that, while the phrase British baseball may be oxymoronic, the sport does in fact have a long (but not glorious) history in Great Britain.

Finland’s version of baseball is certainly unique, as historian and archivist Mikko Hyvärinen explains in “Finland: Pesäpallo, Baseball Finnish Style.” An early-twentieth-century creation of a politically conservative Finnish sports educator, Lauri Pihkala, pesäpallo was inspired by American baseball. There were of course Finnish bat-and-ball-game precursors to pesäpallo. Yet on a 1907 trip to the United States, Pihkala attended a Boston Red Sox game, which he found engaging, if too slow. Years later, after much innovation, Pihkala introduced pesäpallo, which for many years was widely considered the Finnish national sport. People familiar with baseball will immediately grasp some features of pesäpallo. It has a pitcher, a batter, and fielders. There are bases (well, areas called bases) to which a batter must run after he or she puts the ball in play. Runs are scored. Baseball gloves are used. Yet some of the differences are stark. The pitcher, for one, stands next to the batter, not sixty feet and six inches away on a mound, and then tosses the ball skyward, which the batter hits on its descent. Hyvärinen notes other
differences between the games, in addition to pesäpallo’s ideological roots, its recent history, and why the game is especially meaningful to Finns from small towns.

The last chapter is by political scientist Robert Elias, author of *The Empire Strikes Out: How Baseball Sold U.S. Foreign Policy and Promoted the American Way Abroad* (2010). In “The World Baseball Classic: Conflicts and Contradictions,” Elias critiques Major League Baseball’s attitudes toward and policies regarding other baseball-playing nations. He begins by asking: “Does the WBC serve the sport’s best interests?” It is a good, tough question. After surveying different ways in which MLB has maintained its status as an international baseball hegemon, often pursuing profit and its primacy at the expense of evenhandedness and the game’s global well-being, Elias concludes that the WBC primarily served and serves American interests. “To pursue any sort of real baseball globalization and development of the sport,” Elias argues, rather than just a rapacious, self-serving version of globalization, “MLB will have to do more than maximize its profits.” It is unclear, however, what would persuade MLB and its many stakeholders to change their modus operandi. In 2014 MLB generated approximately nine billion dollars in revenue, a record-setting amount and a 13 percent increase from the year before.6

A few words about our own involvement in baseball and why we produced this anthology are appropriate. As an anthropologist, George has spent a good deal of his career over the past forty years living in other cultures. And as a former professional baseball player who devoted his youth and early adulthood to the game, he was naturally interested in knowing what local versions of baseball were like. In some of the countries in which he has taught and done research—Austria, Barbados, and Vietnam—there isn’t any baseball to speak of, which in itself is intriguing. Why in Vietnam, for example, where hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops had been deployed over nearly two decades, had baseball not caught on? Or why in Barbados, where there had been a small U.S. naval station where Americans played baseball
and softball, was the sport never taken up by local villagers? In other places he has lived—notably Japan, Ireland, Britain, and Australia—baseball has taken root, though with wildly varying levels of interest.

George’s interest in “foreign” baseball also stems from having spent several seasons in the 1960s playing in a professional league outside the United States—in the independent Quebec Provincial League. And after having been selected to play on a Canadian team that was to barnstorm in Cuba, he looked forward to the trip with much anticipation, only to be dropped from the squad because he held a U.S. passport. Even before that, while still a Minor League first baseman in the Detroit Tigers’ farm system, he had fantasies of someday playing in Japan. Editing this anthology has allowed him to explore what might have been.

Like George, Dan played baseball as a boy and in high school (though not well) and then again in his thirties in the local Roy Hobbs amateur recreation league (again, not well). Beginning in the early 1970s, while living in suburban Washington DC, he rooted enthusiastically for the Baltimore Orioles, like his father and grandfather. Many years later he realized that the game was worthy of scholarly study. Since then he has been writing baseball history, most notably about the Black Sox scandal and the Negro Leagues. His interest in international baseball and the game’s globalization can be traced to his experiences as a Fulbright scholar at the Tampereen yliopisto in Finland in 2001–2.

Living and working in Tampere for almost a year with his wife—who gave birth to their son there—was remarkable. He learned a great deal about Finnish culture and history, as well as about how many Finns and others understood and imagined the United States and Americans. Stumbling upon pesäpallo was a revelation. “Is this baseball?” he wondered, watching ballplayers attired in a what looked to him like a bewildering combination of softball gear, NASCAR driver jumpsuits (with corporate logos all over their loosely fitting jerseys), and minimalist bicycle helmets. It was baseball, of a sort. Partly due to
his Finnish experience (and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks), Dan became increasingly interested in transnational studies of American culture and globalization.

We are hopeful that readers will learn and better appreciate several things from this collection. First, the remarkable heterogeneity of baseball history, of how the game was and is played and experienced, and what it meant and means to people around much (but not all) of the world. Obviously, what baseball signifies to many Cubans and Dominicans is different from what it does to, say, even die-hard Italian and Aussie baseball players and fans. For many good reasons, different places have different investments in the game: financial and emotional investments, but also historical and cultural. Second, we hope readers appreciate what these essays tell us about globalization, which is multivalent, often asymmetrical, and ever in flux. Baseball is inorganic; it does not grow or spread naturally. It evolved in the United States (and perhaps Canada) and was then exported and dispersed around the world, but not always by Americans. How the game was introduced to different places matters, as does how it continues to circulate in different cultural networks. The ways in which the game sometimes travels back and forth across international borders are often amazing. Third, we are also hopeful that readers will learn something about the many countries and cultures examined here through baseball. Doing so might promote a kind of cosmopolitanism and a sense of global citizenship. We also hope that readers simply enjoy learning about how baseball is played and thought about in places near and far. One might think of the book as a baseball adventure narrative and of our contributors as knowledgeable guides.

Finally, as some readers may know, the first edition of this book was titled *Baseball without Borders: The International Pastime*. The title was partly inspired by the humanitarian aid organization Doctors without Borders, which was founded in the late 1960s and provides free medical aid to people all over the world. Only after the book was published did we begin to think that the title was somewhat misleading. After all,
baseball does have borders, and the nations examined here do, too. In his review of *Baseball without Borders*, historian Joel S. Franks notes that the book “shows vividly that baseball has proven the permeability of national borders. But, for good or ill, those borders still exist and still shape baseball’s history.” Franks is correct. The geopolitical and baseball worlds clearly have borders that divide nations and continents. They are often contested and traversed, but they do exist and they have myriad effects on people and their cultural practices and institutions, including baseball. In recognition of this, we have changed the title of this new edition.

NOTES

5. Iraq and Iran do have national baseball teams, and, remarkably, in Iran the game seems to be becoming more popular. See Jason Rezaian, “America’s Pastime Finds Some Fans in Iran,” *Washington Post*, July 18, 2014, A6.
Between innings at the ballpark in Havana, we fell into a candid conversation with a Cuban baseball official.

“What would happen if the United States lifted the embargo tomorrow?” we asked. “Maybe a freighter, a big one from Rawlings or Wilson, docked in the harbor and they began to unload all kinds of equipment. Baseballs, gloves, bats—everything that could be used down here?”

Miguel Valdes, then the technical director for the Cuban national team, looked out toward the game, seemingly ignoring my traveling partner, Milton Jamail, and me.

“What would happen?” he finally answered.

Yes, we replied. What if such a ship rolled past the Old World fortress that marked the entrance to the Havana harbor and tied up to the ancient piers?

“What would happen?” Valdes repeated, his voice low and serious. “The world as we know it would change forever.”

This world began to change forever a week before Christmas 2014 when President Barack Obama and President Raúl Castro announced that they would reestablish diplomatic relations, ending more than a half century of animosity between the two Cold War foes.¹

The move has been criticized in some quarters—labeled as a capitulation to the Castro brothers. In the short term, it may empower the current government in Havana. But in the long run, it could lead to real
progress and change on the island. The Cuban people are fascinated by our culture, sports, and entertainment. This move allows more of those passions to come into everyday play.

On a corner of the main park in Havana, at the famed Esquina Caliente, or “Hot Corner,” they gather almost daily under the royal palm trees to discuss nothing but baseball. To political hard-liners, such a get-together is nothing more than a curiosity. But if table tennis helped open China, baseball could now play a similar role in the relationship between the two nations.²

Those at Esquina Caliente know the statistics of the big-time stars as well, perhaps even better, than most American baseball fans. They take pride that Yoenis Cespedes, Aroldis Chapman, and Yasiel Puig—all Cuban born—have taken center stage in the U.S. Major Leagues. Yet the borders can blur in Cuba, often about small things that Americans frequently take for granted.

On a trip to Havana’s Central Park in 1999, I took along copies of USA Today Baseball Weekly. The cover story was about players nearing the end of their careers—Paul Molitor, Dennis Eckersley, and Cal Ripken Jr. Once again, I was reminded of one of the major contradictions about Cuba: they may hear what is going on elsewhere in the world, but they are rarely afforded a good look. In the United States we may not care about the latest Hollywood or sports celebrity. But, like it or not, we know enough about Brad Pitt or Jennifer Lopez or Cal Ripken to probably pick them out of a crowd.

For a half century, due to the embargo and the highly politicized tone, the relationship between the United States and Cuba has been like a giant black curtain. The kind of barrier found in an old-style theater. The kind that always muffles the sound and allows only a rare glimpse to what’s going on on the other side. In 2014 the curtain of discontent and dysfunction between the United States and Cuban began to part.

In 1999 the Cuban national team played the Baltimore Orioles. On the return flight home, I ended up sitting next to Stan Kasten. Major League Baseball’s charter jet rose to maybe twenty thousand feet out
1. *Esquina Caliente* (Hot Corner) in Havana where fans come to discuss baseball seven days a week. (Photo by Tim Wendel.)

2. Pitching in the park in Havana. (Photo by Tim Wendel.)
of Havana before beginning to descend for our approach to Miami. As American soil appeared below, the Florida Straits already well behind us, I asked Kasten, “How tough would it be, Stan? To put a professional ball club, a U.S. one, in Havana?”

Kasten is one of the sharpest guys in professional sports. He was part of the ownership group that purchased the Los Angeles Dodgers, and before that he was in the front office with the Atlanta Braves, Atlanta Thrashers, and Atlanta Hawks—all at the same time. While with the Hawks he led his National Basketball Association team on an unprecedented trip to the Soviet Union for an exhibition tour. In other words, he knows, perhaps better than anybody else in professional sports, what it takes to turn a socialist country toward capitalism with sports.

“A team in Havana?” Kasten replied.

“Sure, either Minor League or even someday a Major League franchise.”

“Turn around the politics,” Kasten smiled, “and it would be a piece of cake.”

Of course, even the Kastens of the world have a ways to go before a Minor League team sets up shop in the old stadium in Havana, where we once talked with Miguel Valdes. (Valdes eventually left Cuba and works for the New York Mets.) But in the weeks after the December 2014 announcement between Washington and Havana, a group formed that wanted to transform the Cuban league into the premier winter-ball format in the world. It would be a league that would once again welcome U.S. players to the island.

In the months after the announcement, Major League Baseball (MLB) found itself in the same boat with American tourism interests. With Republicans in control on Capitol Hill, the Cuban Embargo was still in place, but change was certainly in the air. At least initially, the new relationship with Cuba meant better banking relationships and easier imports of Cuban rum and cigars. As for the rest of it? As trade attorney Robert Muse told the Washington Post, for many American companies the sanctions look “like a scary forest with monsters.”
What this means for professional baseball has yet to be determined. While MLB issued a statement saying it was “closely monitoring” matters, many experts felt the new developments would only accelerate the movement of Cuban players to play professionally in the United States. At the very least it would end a deteriorating situation that had players going to great lengths, sometimes making deals with drug cartels and crime syndicates, to leave the island.

Almost a quarter century ago pitcher René Arocha ducked into a waiting car outside the Miami International Airport and left Cuba forever. In doing so he became the first baseball star from that country to defect. Many of those who followed in his footsteps—José Contreras, the Hernández brothers Liván and Orlando—still speak of him in reverential tones.

“He was the one who opened the door for the rest of us,” Orlando “El Duque” Hernández said.5

In demonstrating that Cubans could play in America, if they had the courage and guile to get away, Arocha wrote the script that has been followed until now. A player could slip away while the Cuban national team played in another country. This was often more difficult than it seemed. On the road Team Cuba brought its own security detail to keep any eye on everyone. To be caught usually meant being excluded from the roster for the next international tournament or Olympics. A player could also be blackballed from playing in the Cuban leagues.

To try to leave directly from Cuba was even more dangerous. Since the early 1960s, as Castro’s grip tightened, thousands of everyday Cubans took to rafts and tried to cross the Florida Straits. An estimated sixteen thousand died trying to do so. And any rafter knew that he had to step foot on American soil to fully escape. If apprehended at sea, the U.S. Coast Guard could return him to Havana to face the consequences.

As the curtain began to fall, Cuban ballplayers were among the top
stars in the game. Nobody generated more excitement or debate than outfielder Yasiel Puig of the Los Angeles Dodgers. Nobody enjoyed the spotlight more than outfielder Yoenis Cespedes, a Home Run Derby champion. And nobody threw harder than fireballing relief pitcher Aroldis Chapman. Yet few of these stars followed the same exit strategy as Arocha or even the Hernández brothers took to play on baseball’s biggest and most lucrative stage. This new path often involved high-dollar promises, plenty of cloak-and-dagger, and deals with dangerous crime syndicates. The parade of new stars coming out of Cuba reads like something from a Graham Greene novel.

Yasiel Puig was caught repeatedly and sent back to Cuba before finally making it to Southern California. In December 2014 a South Florida businessman pleaded guilty to taking part in a conspiracy to smuggle Puig out of Cuba. In return Puig promised him a cut of his multimillion-dollar salary. Court documents detailed how Gilberto Suarez was one of the Miami-based financiers of the 2012 smuggling venture in which Puig was taken by boat from Cuba to a village near Cancún, Mexico. The baseball star eventually crossed into the United States at Brownsville, Texas.

Aroldis Chapman has been sued under the Torture Victims Protection Act in Florida after somebody who tried to help him get out of Cuba ended up in prison there. According to Yahoo! Sports, Chapman served as a government informant to stay in the good graces of Cuban baseball officials.6

Yoenis Cespedes also found himself in court, where a judge eventually ruled that he needed to pay eight million dollars of the thirty-six-million-dollar deal that he originally signed with the Oakland Athletics to the gambling-hall proprietor who helped get him off the island.

Perhaps the most original escape from Cuba belonged to Yoan Moncada, a nineteen-year-old shortstop prospect. He avoided the smugglers and contract deals entirely by filing for a visa in Havana to travel to Guatemala. For some reason the Cuban authorities gave it to him, and Moncada legally left the country and never looked back. After estab-
lishing residency in Guatemala, which allowed him to avoid baseball’s amateur draft, he began shopping his services to Major League teams.

But there is more to the story of Moncada’s departure. After all, this is Cuba we’re talking about. According to *vice Sports*, Nicole Banks, a California sports agent, aided Moncada. While nobody is certain of the particulars of Banks’s role, she reportedly became romantically involved with Moncada.

Such is the power of baseball in Cuba. It can break through any rules and regulations, especially in today’s changing climate, and it can cause people to dream of the impossible. That’s the way it has been for more than a century on the island. In the United States the national pastime will always be the game of red, white, and blue bunting and Mom’s apple pie. In Cuba, from its very beginnings, the game was deemed dangerous and radical. So much so that it allowed Cubans to turn their backs on the old colonial ways, never more so then when Spain controlled the island, and demonstrate their preference for a new, independent nation.

“For many years, baseball in Cuba was a sport encased in amber,” author S. L. Price said. “That’s changing now. It had to change, sooner or later, for the game and the country itself to move ahead.”

More than a half century after Fidel Castro’s revolution, the debate still rages about him and baseball. Is he a national hero or the devil incarnate? It often depends on which side of the Florida Straits you have that conversation. But any student of history concedes that Castro’s decision to play baseball and form a ragtag barnstorming company from his rebel army called Los Barbudos (the Bearded Ones) was a stroke of genius. Castro knew how important baseball was and will always be for Cubans.

Los Barbudos played a series of exhibitions in the months after Castro took control of the island in 1959. The new president sometimes took the mound to show off his loopy curve ball for cheering baseball
aficionados. That Fidel Castro has outlasted several U.S. administrations (Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush, and Obama) and counting is a credit to his understanding of his country’s soul more than any success in national health or education.

Was Castro a legitimate baseball prospect? Again, it depends upon whom you talk to or what you choose to believe. According to Tad Szulc’s acclaimed biography *Fidel: A Critical Portrait* (1986), Castro was an impressive athlete before enrolling in Havana University’s law school in 1945. While attending Belen College, a preparatory school, he was the institution’s top athlete, starring in track, table tennis, basketball, and baseball.

While researching his book Szulc had full access to Castro and his closest associates. Szulc says that Castro was so determined to be Belen’s best pitcher that he often practiced “until eight o’clock in the evening at the school’s sports grounds. Long after the catcher got tired and left, Castro would go on throwing the ball against the wall.”

Whether such effort attracted the attention of big-league scouts has never been confirmed. While researching my novel *Castro’s Curveball* (2000), I spoke with several scouts and players from the old Cuban winter-ball league. Some dismissed such speculation about Castro’s prowess, while several insisted that Castro was pretty good and had even pitched batting practice for them. Legend has it that the Washington Senators and New York Giants were interested in signing Castro in the waning years of World War II. At that point Castro was not overly politically active and had not fully aligned himself with the growing revolutionary factions in Cuba.

Searches at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, turn up a *Sport* magazine article from 1964. In it Don Hoak, who spent eleven years in the Major Leagues and several winters playing in Cuba, details a strange evening at the old ballpark in Havana, the same place we spoke with Miguel Valdes decades later. The year was 1951, Hoak said, and it was not unusual back then for students to come out of the stands and interrupt games to protest the government or...
the hold that such corporations as United Fruit had on their country. Once again, baseball was seen as a path to an independent nation.

On this night, Hoak recalled, a tall, skinny student wearing a white shirt, black pants, and suede shoes took the mound. Hoak was the next batter due up. To his dying day Hoak maintained that the interloper was a young Castro.

“Left-handers as a breed are eccentric, but Castro, a right-hander, looked kookier than any southpaw I have known,” Hoak later told Sport.9

Hoak fouled off two Castro pitches before the field was cleared of demonstrators.

So the question remains: Was Castro a legitimate prospect? Probably not. But right when you’re ready to dismiss such notions, somebody steps out of the past.

On another trip to Havana we were talking with several fans at the Esquina Caliente, and one of them, an old man, claimed to have played baseball with Castro as a boy on the eastern end of the island, where they both grew up. We asked about that part of the world, trying to catch the old-timer in a fib. But he fielded all of our queries flawlessly.

Finally, we asked, “What did Castro throw?”

“So-so fastball, sneaky slider at the knees,” the old man answered. “But his best pitch was a curve ball. Castro had a great curve.”

So appropriate for all that happened over the past half century when it comes to the rocky relationship between the United States and Cuba, don’t you think?

As we are witnessing once again, affairs of state can remain locked in place until one event causes a major upheaval. It has happened before in Cuba, and it is beginning to happen again.

In 1949 Orestes “Minnie” Miñoso broke in with the Cleveland Indians and spent much of that season and the next in the Minor Leagues. Early in the ’51 season he was traded to the Chicago White Sox, where he had to confront racial discrimination as well as opposing batters.
“First you had Jackie Robinson. Then Larry Doby and then you had me,” Miñoso said. “I was the first black-skinned ballplayer to play in the city of Chicago.”

To make the leap, Miñoso explained, he had “to be strong in the mind.” That required him to remember that Cuban players such as the great Martín Dihigo had not gotten a chance to play in the Major Leagues. Also, star players such as Ted Williams told Miñoso that he had talent. That he could hit in this league. He just had to stick it out.

“I cannot tell you how good that made me feel,” Miñoso said. “How I remembered that when I was going through difficult times, on and off the field.”

Between 1951 and 1961 Miñoso scored more than one hundred runs four times and was among the leaders in hits. But such accomplishments were often overlooked because the first wave of Latino ballplayers was routinely marginalized. They were often given nicknames they didn’t want. “Orestes Miñoso, with his proud classical name, became ‘Minnie’ Minoso in the United States,” Yale scholar Roberto González Echevarria wrote.

Yet such struggles paled in comparison to the decision Miñoso made regarding his homeland of Cuba. When Castro’s armies took control of Havana in 1959, they were greeted as conquering heroes. Huge crowds lined the streets, cheering their arrival. Few of Castro’s countrymen realized what the new leader had in store for the island as his tanks and soldiers streamed into the capital. But at least one ballplayer had a feeling that things were not as they seemed.

Miñoso sat in his trademark Cadillac as the military parade tied up traffic in Havana soon after the Batista regime fell. Passing rebels recognized him and called for Miñoso to join them. The ballplayer left his car and was about to climb aboard one of the military trucks when something stopped him in his tracks. Something didn’t feel right about the whole situation. Miñoso claims that from that moment on, he never trusted the Castro government. Despite the cheering crowds, he hung back.

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Soon after that day Miñoso made plans to leave the island and re-settle permanently in the United States. It would prove to be a costly process, as he owned several apartment buildings and a fleet of taxis. By pulling out of Cuba, he knew he would lose a lot of money.

Of course, Miñoso wasn’t the only one to make such a decision. The exodus began in earnest as Castro destroyed the old social order and moved Cuba toward a socialist way of life. Soon after taking power, Castro abolished the professional winter-ball teams that had existed for decades on the island. Cubans would be amateurs and amateurs only, with the country’s new president questioning the national team coaches about game strategy and roster moves.

The Cuban Revolution and the subsequent events had a profound on the U.S. baseball community. The Minnesota Twins, for example, had already released Tony Oliva when the Bay of Pigs debacle took place. All flights back to Cuba were canceled, so the Twins decided to keep him. Oliva went on to become the only player to win batting championships in his first two years in the Majors.

George Genovese was managing the Giants’ Minor League affiliate in El Paso soon after the revolution. On his roster was José Cardenal, a Cuban who was listed as an infielder. “José hadn’t shown much in spring training and he was about to get released,” Genovese remembers. “So I decided to take him along with me to El Paso and make an outfielder out of him. . . . I knew if he went back to Cuba, he would never get out.”

The move paid off. As a right fielder Cardenal homered in his first game for El Paso and went on to hit thirty-six home runs that season. He played eighteen seasons in the Major Leagues, including appearances in the 1978 National League Championship Series and the 1980 World Series. He became a confidant to many of the Cuban players who followed him to the United States.

In 1999 the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban national team played a two-game exhibition series; the first game was in Havana and the
second a few weeks later in Baltimore. The first game was an extra-inning affair, with the Major Leaguers barely winning. In the rematch the Cubans trounced the Orioles.

Even though protesters came on the field, eerily reminiscent of Don Hoak’s tall tale, the most memorable moment that night in Baltimore belonged to Andy Morales, a journeyman for the Cuban squad. His home run drove in Team Cuba’s final runs in the 12–6 victory. As the infielder rounded the bases, he almost broke into a dance. He raised his arms in the air and nearly stumbled as he rounded second base.

After the game was over several Orioles grumbled that Morales had shown them up. After all, you’re not supposed to exhibit so much emotion in baseball, at least not in the Major Leagues.

Back home in Cuba Morales was feted by Castro himself. So why did he try to defect a year after that exhibition game? Why, when he was sent back to Cuba, did he try again sixteen months later and this time make it to South Florida?

Some would say he simply wanted a better life. He had seen firsthand the luxurious existence of a Major Leaguer and the riches that can be earned for hitting a ball with a bat and sending it soaring into the night sky. But perhaps it wasn’t all about the money. In America, as in much of the world, you can compete against the best. Have a head for stocks? Go to Wall Street. Ready to lead a nation? Try to fix Washington.

But if you have played ball for the past half century in Cuba, one had to often risk everything to play against the best. That is what the Baltimore Orioles, even many of the politicians, never fully understood.

It has been said that the real Cuba lies in the shadows and alleyways of Old Havana—anywhere baseball is played. The essence of the land rides the night air like a piece of music that grabs your attention, only to dissolve when you stop and try to determine where the tune is coming from.

In Havana they like to say that maybe tonight the world will sink into the earth. The waiting for something better might come to an end. The prayers may be answered.

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Perhaps now, with Washington and Havana formally recognizing each other, the curtain that has long hung between the two nations is finally coming down.

NOTES
2. DeVoss, “Ping-Pong Diplomacy.”
11. Miñoso, interview.

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