

# A demanding season makes for good baseball

Oscar Sánchez Serra, Special correspondent

• TOKYO. – Let us try and forget the image left by our team during its last appearance against the Netherlands, although this is very hard for all Cubans, to review the work of the national team managed by Carlos Martí in the 2017 World Baseball Classic.

Before arriving in the Japanese capital, the great majority of fans and sportswriters, myself included, agreed that this group of players could go no farther than the second round in a competition as demanding as the one in which they just played. National baseball authorities had the same opinion and established as the goal reaching this stage. Of course, once the team had qualified for the second round, it was difficult to be satisfied with the accomplishment, hoping for more perhaps without foundation. Even though they lost, the team looked better in the first two games of this round, as compared to their performance in the initial three games.

Let us recall the first match-up against Japan (6-11), which without a pitching strategy, didn't cause Japan much trouble. Facing China, the weakest team participating, Cuba scored six runs, and the modest opponent remained scoreless for the first three innings. Nonetheless, despite the 14 hits made during the game, only in one inning - the fourth - was Cuba able to show its superiority. Then came the crucial battle with Australia, which again came down to a single inning, when Alfredo Despaigne's grand slam paved the way to the second round. The Australians batted with ease, but came up short 4-3 because of one play.

After qualifying as one of the eight second round teams, in Group E, Cuba was silenced by Israel. The offense made only five hits. Another homerun by Despaigne was the only score. The team's fifth appearance was much better, playing toe to toe with Japan, with the home team's winning run coming in the eighth inning, off of an error. Finally, the debacle against the Netherlands, 1-14.

I am one who believes in these men, in their pride. As Carlos Martí said, they gave their all, knowing that they were not as good as many high-performance players in the quarter-finals, be they Israel's excellent pitchers, those on

the unflappable Japanese team, or the Netherlands' explosive batters.

I agree with him, and with those who believe that we cannot address huge gaps in our national pastime in one World Classic, which in my opinion are the responsibility of our national baseball leadership, since they are the result of social as well as competitive issues. Put on a good spectacle during the regular season and we will harvest the results.

If we do not achieve this, with the high level of performance required, players sent to a Classic will not know how to behave under pressure, like that delivered by the Netherlands, which was not answered in kind, on time. If a pitcher easily dominates batters in undemanding games, when he reaches this level, he will be picked apart, like Lázaro Blanco. I cite his example because he is the best of our pitchers, but I could have mentioned many others.

On the offense, we faced the same problem. Jefferson Delgado, top hitter in the National Series this season, said simply, "It's very hard for me. In the Series in Cuba, I see a fastball, but not like here; it's cut. A curve ball rotates differently; the slider starts out with more speed, and you don't have time to pull back the bat. It's really complicated, it's high level pitching." No comment.

There is some evidence that Cuba batted well, but the average or the number of hits doesn't tell all. I believe we were inefficient on offense. How else can we explain that with 52 at-bats, we only scored 10 runs? How can we win if the first, second, and third batter in the line up, in the second round, only made one hit in 32 at-bats. If that weren't enough, the lead line-up showed little speed running the bases, and didn't aggressively seek extra bases. These are details that, regardless of the opponent, undermine any hopes of victory.

Our pitching was the worst. The statement may sound categorical, but I don't think there was any pitching easier to hit than Cuba's. Even though China's appears equivalent, they gave up fewer walks.

In conversations with colleagues and among comments sent by fans, the issue has been raised of players trained in Cuba who have gone on to become stars in the U.S. Major

Leagues. Many believe the result would have been different with their presence. I don't doubt it; we could even win a Classic. But the solution to resolving problems in Cuban baseball would remain unresolved. Negotiations between the MLB and the Cuban Federation continue, but I insist that something must be done in the interim.

Baseball must be played in Cuba; if we love it so much, it must be given the attention it merits, for what it represents. It stirs up patriotic sentiments, moves crowds, impacts our mood, in short, it affects an entire country. With well thought out organization, without cheap triumphalism, and putting science into our game - as baseball is a science - everything we invest would be recovered.

We must look deeply into all aspects of the game, from the season's organization to the professional level of those directing the sport. Regarding this quality, I am talking about teamwork, capable of turning things around. It takes time, but time is short.

With the quantity of ballplayers we have, growing almost "wild" - forgive me the term, but that is the way it is - we could have baseball year-round, at different levels, especially at a lower level. Then, a National Series, with all provinces participating and no more than 75 games, to choose a champion. But after that, we could have a Cuban League with four or six teams and the best players, playing perhaps October through January, so that those working abroad, contracted by the National Federation, could participate. Players from other countries could even be included, or from the MLB, if the negotiations advance. Cuba has what it takes to develop a competitive league; it has the most important element: human material.

If Cuban players left the Classic downcast, they know that, in baseball, things like the knock-out in the last game are not allowed. No one made an appearance, but their manager, despite the bad moment, had words of recognition for his team. "The Netherlands didn't give us time to recover, as we say in baseball language, they caught our eyes."

It's over, let's not lose any more time. Let's give baseball some attention, but with our eyes wide open. We have time. •

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