

Cuban baseball's unbreakable records

Practically everything can be measured in baseball, which is why it's the sport with the most records

Sigfredo Barros Segre

RICARDO LÓPEZ HEVIA

• TALKING about baseball records anywhere in the world is always a passionate conversation because, among other factors, among all the sports that exist, it's the one with the most records. Practically everything can be measured, from how a team plays on grass or a synthetic field; during the day or at night; or whether a player bats better with three balls and no strikes, or two strikes and no balls.

However, things get a lot more complicated when the discussion turns to Cuban baseball. The game has undergone many changes in the country: from the original four team, 27-game Series set up, to two 99-game Super Series in 1968 and 1969; then 15 years of the 90-game, 16-team, two-phase, four-group format; followed by 97 in the 51st Series (the only one to feature an odd number of teams) through today, with teams able to select reinforcements half way through the season; meaning that the structure of Cuban baseball has changed almost 20 times to date.

It is also worth noting that in 1977 the traditional wooden bat was replaced with a metal one, following a decision by the International Baseball Federation, which was met with strong criticism from the sport's amateur movement. According to the majority of experts, the new version increased a team's offensive capacity by 25%, giving batters a huge advantage over pitchers. Although the metal bat was discarded in 1999, it left its mark on the majority of records which exist today.

When the conversation turns to the most outstanding record, there are as many choices as there are participants in the discussion. For me personally, the one that stands out is that set by Osmani Urrutia from Las Tunas: Five straight batting titles in the National Series, averaging close to .400 in four tournaments. He would have secured six consecutive wins but in 2006, despite averaging .425, was surpassed by Michel Enríquez, from the Isle of Youth, with a legendary score of .447. Urrutia reclaimed his crown one year later, making for six of seven titles from 2001-2007 - a difficult feat to repeat.

Meanwhile, Enrique Díaz's record of 55 stolen bases, set in 1993, - following a decline in Cuba's offense - seems almost unbelievable today, given that there is no sign of anyone even reaching 40. I imagine that this record will remain unbroken for a long time to come.

FOUR HOME RUNS IN A SINGLE GAME

To date, 17 players have hit four home runs in a single game in the Major Leagues, ever since Bobby Lowe did it for the first time in 1894. In Cuba, three men have achieved the same feat: Leonel Moya, Alberto Díaz, and Omar Linares in that order. They needn't worry about their record being broken, as no player in any league has ever hit five.

While on the subject of homeruns, Alexei Bell's (Santiago de Cuba) double grand slam in a single inning, on November 3, 2009, would also seem pretty hard to beat. Meanwhile, Fernando Tatis from the Dominican Republic, is the only player to have achieved such a feat in the MLB. An inning



Osmani Urrutia, holder of six batting titles in seven seasons.

would have to last an eternity for the entire line-up to bat three times.

And although it might come as a surprise to some, in 1930, a player named Gene Rye hit three home runs - not with all the bases loaded - for the Waco Cubs in the Texas league.

THE OLDEST RECORD

When, in 1969 Cuba's 99-game Series ended, it left, among other feats, one that looked like it could be broken. But time passed and Wilfredo Sánchez of Matanza's record of 13 triples is soon set to turn 50. Only three batters have reached 12, which might have something to do with the back luck associated with the number 13.

Since 1962 the record for hits in a season continued to increase year on year until Wilfredo made 140. Thirty years would have to pass before Michel Enríquez would make 152 in the 38th National Series - an achievement soon set to celebrate its 20th anniversary. Cuba has tactical batters such as Yoelkis Céspedes, Roel Santos, Víctor Víctor... but so far none of them have decided to pursue the record set by the Island of Youth's so called Super 12 team.

Starting with the three modest homeruns made by Rolando "Gallego" Valdés in the first Series, followed by Armando Capiró's 22

in 1973; then 28 by Pedro José Rodríguez five years later; and 30 by Orestes Kindelán in the 12th Series (1986), Alfredo Despaigne from Granma, set the most recent record, hitting 38 homers in 2012.

But with Cuban batting being fairly weak, a new homerun record doesn't look to be set anytime soon.

Despaigne is the only player who could potentially break his own record, but his commitment to the Japanese Professional League - with a long season of over 140 games - makes this virtually impossible.

Nor for the moment does anyone seem likely to break the record for runs-batted-in, which rose substantially in one of the two 99-game Series, held in 1998, when Miguel Cuevas from Camagüey made 86.

In 2008, during a fantastic season which saw him hit 31 homeruns, Alexei Bell made 111 RBIs. Since then no one has even come close to reaching 80, with Yordanis Samón representing last season's top scorer with 76.

Scoring runs is one of the most important aspects of the game, with a team's success depending its ability to make it to the home plate more often than their opponent. Enrique Díaz, gave a historic performance in a Series which already seems like a distant memory: the 2003, 42nd edition, where he batted in exactly 100 runs, a figure that no one has even come close to matching

in recent years. Stayler Hernández made just 73 in the 55th Series, while Yordanis Samón brought in 65 in the most recent edition of the competition.

A FORGOTTEN RECORD

There exists a record which, to put it bluntly, is hardly ever mentioned and seems to have fallen into oblivion. For me it is one of the most important, given the level of dedication and sacrifice it entailed: the 1,112 consecutive games played by Alexander Ramos from Pinar del Rio represent one of the most difficult records to match, let alone break. Why? The reason is simple: there's no other player with the same spirit of sacrifice, willing to go out on the field day after day, and do their job, despite pain or personal problems.

Another noteworthy record is Rey Isaac's (Santiago de Cuba) 37 game hitting streak in the 1994-1995 Series, which broke Lázaro Vargas' previous record of 31, and established a new high which, after more than 20 years, remains unbeaten.

So there you have it, Cuban baseball's so-called "unbreakable" records. And remember, there are so many records in baseball that I wasn't even able to mention pitching achievements. That'll have to wait for another time. •