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# Baseball Beyond Our Borders

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# **Baseball Beyond Our Borders**

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# **BASEBALL BEYOND OUR BORDERS**

*An International Pastime*

Edited by *George Gmelch* and *Daniel A. Nathan*

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In memory of Bill Kirwin, friend and mentor, who created a community of baseball scholars, an annual event to bring them together, and an academic journal for their work.

—*George Gmelch*

and

For Allan Winkler, historian, adventurer, mentor, and friend, who sent us to Finland. And SBZ, always.

—*Daniel A. Nathan*



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# Introduction

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## 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."<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> Baseball arrived in Cuba in the 1860s, introduced by students returning from the United States. Folklore credits Nemiso Guillo 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.<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.