# The Popularity of Soccer in Cuba

## Introduction

Cuba, also referred to as the Republic of Cuba is a country within the northern Caribbean and its location is at the meeting point of the Caribbean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Gulf of Mexico. The country is also the largest within the Caribbean and has over 11 million inhabitants. From a cultural perspective, the nation is considered part of Latin America, with its people having diverse ethnic origins with influences from the Spanish colonization as well as its close linkage to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Beyond such aspects, Cuba is a country previously known to embrace America's pastime and take it as its own and hence its common association with baseball. The embracing of baseball, a sport linked to the United States, within the country is due to the historical and political affiliation of the nation with the United States. Such implies that cultural aspects including sports in the country have over time had influences from the political culture and associations in the country.

Despite the common association of the country with baseball, Cuba is slowly adopting soccer as one of its pastimes. Although no specific period can be associated with the emergence of the sport in the country, its influx is only taking place in the contemporary time. Much of this broad adoption can be attributed to the 2012 directive by Raul Castro's government that Cubans with passports were allowed to leave the island. From this directive, most Cuban baseball players engaged in a mass exodus to pursue professional baseball in the United States and this lessened the interest in the sports in the country. Soccer, therefore, was taken up by Cubans as a way of filling the gap left by its traditional baseball sport. The paper that follows discusses how soccer is taking shape within Cuba and how the Cuban culture has affected the sport.

## The Political Influence

Soccer in Cuba has a linkage to political elements, and this is especially visible during the Cold War period affecting the United States and Russia. Cuba's political system is one considered a democratic centralist instituted in 1959 in a one state one party principle. Beyond this attribution, Cuba is defined as a socialist state where the country's constitution attributes the Communist Party of Cuba as the leading force in the country and can set national policies (Peters, 2012). The country has an elected national legislature with its National Assembly meeting twice in a year to look at legislative issues. Under its socialist system, the country was under the leadership of Fidel Castro considered a communist revolutionary leader who took up the Prime Minister role from 1959 to 1976 and then the presidency from 1976 to 2008. It was under Fidel Castro that the linkage between politics and soccer are evident.

Although the past few decades show a distended relationship between Cuba and the United States, the two countries have enjoyed bouts of warm relationship in the past based on the promotion of trade. Under President Franklin's Good Neighbor Policy, towards Latin America, there was a general positive trading relation between Cuba and the U.S. such that U.S companies owned more than half of the sugar industry in 1926. The US also imported 95 percent of the total crop produce from Cuba while the U.S. was also supportive of Cuban governments (Hugh, 2001). Since then the US government was supportive of Cuba until Castro came to power such that the American Ambassador was sometimes more influential and powerful than the Cuban president. The cordial relationships between Cuba and the US had seen the proliferation of the U.S. culture to the country with an example being the adoption of baseball in Cuba.

The close relations between Cuba and the U.S. and the adoption of baseball almost brought the world to nuclear war after soccer fields were spotted in the country. A year after the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961, one CIA analyst told President Kennedy that he had seen soccer fields on the Cuban coast (Swyter, 2017). The concerns raised by the analysts came from the association of soccer with the Russians and baseball with the United States. The speculations on Cuba's close linkage with Russia led to Kennedy's approval of U-2 flights over Cuba with the intention of photographing the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba. The situation almost escalated into a nuclear war following the Cuban Missile Crisis. True to the speculation by the United States, Cuba had taken up a deal with the Soviet Union to install missile launch facilities to deter an American invasion of the country. Later associations of soccer fields and the Soviet presence in Cuba took place in 1970 after the US spotted the fields near Cienfuegos.

The conclusion drawn from the above discussion is that soccer in Cuba during the 20th century had a linkage to political affiliations, where the presence of soccer fields was associated with an inclination towards the Soviet Union. Importantly, this pastime almost led to a nuclear war that would have had an effect not only on the Soviet and the US but also around the world. Despite the presence of soccer fields in Cuba during this period, the country did not adopt the sport widely, and baseball, as well as other sports such as boxing, continued to dominate the sporting culture in the country.

## The Popularity of Soccer in the 21st Century

The popularity of the sport in Cuba has only taken shape in the recent past, and much of this is attributable to political facilitations as well as socio-cultural changes in the country. While the location of the soccer field that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war took place in 1962, Cubans were already playing soccer though it was yet to gain as much prominence as baseball. Cuba appeared in the 1938 soccer World Cup where it suffered an 8-0 loss to Sweden, and from then on, there was little evidence of soccer in the socialist republic. The popularity that soccer currently has is linked to the decline of baseball in Cuba that can also be associated with the influence of the United States. According to Baxter (2016), most people blame the recent changes and the country's inclination towards soccer to domestic baseball league decline. The decline came about following the country's loss of its top players to the United States to play the Major League Baseball. Such implies that this led to a loss of pride in the Cubans as the league no longer provided the much-needed satisfaction for baseball. For Cubans, the reprieve came with soccer that provides another avenue to quell the desires to engage in sports.

Political influences in the development of sports are also seen in the recent past under the government of Raul Castro. In 2012, Castro's government made it possible for Cubans with passports to leave the country. Despite the fact that passports in the country are expensive, this made it possible for the baseball league players to join the United States and become highly paid athletes. Other political effects and their contributions to the popularity of soccer involve the Obama administration's resolve to improve relations with Cuba. During his time at the presidency, Obama sought to foster good relations with Cuba, and both administrations even began talks on having direct commercial flights between the U.S. and Cuba (Doherty, 2016). The association of improved relations between the two countries and the promotion of soccer relates to the 2016 friendly soccer game between the two countries. Before this, Cuba and the US had never met for a friendly game since 1947, and its 2016 game was seen as an act of international goodwill which again affirms linkage between the growth and popularity of soccer in the island to political affairs affecting it.

The emergence and popularity of soccer in the recent past is also linked to the fact that the sport is easy to pick up as compared to other sports in the country. Soccer is more economical based on the notion that one requires only a ball to engage in the sport. Unlike soccer, baseball which has been Cuba's most popular sport requires one to have a glove, a bat, as well as a ball. On the other hand, while soccer can be played in tight spaces, baseball requires a designated ground that may especially not be available within the low income earning sections of the country. Other sports such as boxing also require players to have boxing gloves and also compete in a boxing ring. As such, the economical sense of the sport has had a major contributory role to the adoption of the sport especially among the children and youth in the country.

In the past few decades, the media has also contributed to the popularity of the sport by exposing Cubans to the sport. The state-controlled television in Cuba has over time been showing less and less of baseball games and more of international soccer matches. Baxter (2016) notes that baseball on TV is showcased only once a week and on a tape-delayed basis yet international soccer games are available widely on TV. Restaurants and bars showing these games fill up such as during the April 21st, 2012 match between Barcelona and Real Madrid where Real Madrid won 2-1. The game was one of the most watched internationally, and so was the case in Cuba. With more and more people in Cuba having access to television content where this makes it possible to increase the proliferation and popularity of the sport in the country.

## The Cuban Cultural Effect on the Sport

There is not much difference in soccer played in Cuba, and that played in other regions. In an analysis of the progress of soccer in Cuba, Swyter (2017) notes that soccer played in the Cuban streets and different locations is sometimes informal and do not feature an 11 a side team but instead features two teams of seven members each. The field is also usually smaller than the conventional soccer field where players use a tattered ball and sticks that serve as goal posts. Due to the few number of players as well as their centralization is a small space, the result is usually a fast-paced game with no control of ball possession by either side. Such an approach to playing the soccer game is different from the conventional 11 a side game played in a 90 meters by 120 meters field. Despite such a difference in the game, this is a common aspect during informal play where the game can be played by any number of players within an undetermined pitch size. Informal plays also involve playing in enclosed spaces either on grass or dirt grounds. The formal football game in the country is similar to formal plays in other countries, and this is evident in the fact that the Cuban national team plays against other teams such as the United States. Also, the country takes part in regional competitions such as the Gold Cup, and this implies a similarity in soccer played in Cuba and other parts of the world.

Importantly, the Cuban culture that has been for the past century linked to baseball has affected soccer in Cuba by limiting its progress and growth. Baseball had previously been accepted as a part of the Cuban cultural fabric, and this saw its promotion to one of the most important sports in the country. The implication is that grounds were well developed to accommodate the sport and ensure the growth of talent. Due to this association of the Cuban culture with baseball, there have been limited investments in the growth and development of soccer in the country. This is evident in the fact that soccer fields in the country are lowly developed and do not meet international standards. The friendly match between the United States and Cuba highlighted the sorry state of football facilities in the country. Following the emergence of pictures of the soccer field where the two teams would play, Americans called for the withdrawal of their national team from the match as the conditions were likely to increase the risks of injury for their players (Doherty, 2016). On the other hand, the lack of the concentration on improving talents within the country also means that the players do not have professional development. As such, the Cuban baseball culture has affected soccer in the country by limiting the ability to invest and develop soccer talent within the country. Swyter (2017) notes that one of Fidel's final acts was the request for the development of a soccer field in his neighborhood for the kids as they played on the streets.

Another impact that the Cuban culture has had on soccer in the country is the export of talent to other countries where they can get better remuneration. Despite the fact that the country is associated with a baseball culture, there was a limited professional development of the sport, and this led to the movement of baseball players from the country to the United States' baseball league. As was the case with baseball, the high inclination of the country's sporting culture towards baseball has led to the limited focus on developing soccer talent in the country and this has led to the movement of players to other leagues. As an example, Yosmel de Armas who was part of the national team went missing before a game in Nashville and was later found in Miami seeking asylum (Archibold, 2012). Similarly, other players from the national team such as Maykel Galindo and Osvaldo Alonso left to join the United States where the soccer culture promotes the development of talent while also offering better pay for professional players. The Cuba baseball culture has also limited the promotion of soccer in the country, and this has contributed to the movement of players to other countries for better remuneration and talent development.

The sport has also affected Cuba, and one of these effects is promoting greater integration in the country. As a country characterized by different ethnicities, there is an importance in bringing people together for multicultural interactions that promote peace and higher integration. Soccer provides a platform to promote such aspects as it brings not only the players together but also the fans who interact positively. Such effects of soccer are not only evident in the localized scene but also internationally during regional and world competitions. Soccer has always been seen as a sport that brings different people together in the promotion of positive multicultural interactions. Importantly, this has been the basis for matches such as between the United States and Cuba that was geared towards the promotion of positive correlations between the two countries not just in the social sphere but also within the political setting.

Soccer in the country has also had a positive effect on the promotion of Cuba as a diverse cultural country as well as one viable for economic investments. The participation of the national team in essential events around the world and within regional competitions plays a role in advertising Cuba as a tourist destination and a viable country for investments. While the sport has been seen as a children's sport, its trickle up effect to the national team led the country to win the Caribbean Cup in 2012, yet its national baseball team is yet to win any major competition since 2007. The marketing of Cuba, as well as its talents, have contributed to positive outcomes including increased investments and the movement of its players to professional clubs while also playing for the national team. Such implies that soccer has contributed positively to the exposure of Cuba to the rest of the world.

## Conclusion

Cuba's sporting culture is one that has predominantly inclined towards baseball, but this is changing with the increasing popularity of soccer in the country. Soccer has had linkage to the political aspects of the country including bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war, but its development has only taken shape in the recent past. Such popularity comes about from the decline of baseball as a national sporting culture and the exposure of the young people to soccer through the media. Political elements have also played a part in the promotion of soccer in the country due to the use of the sport to promote political associations. Despite the popularity that the game has in the country, limited development in the sporting culture is limiting the nurturing of soccer talent. Soccer has contributed to positive influences including greater integration among the people as well as encouraging investments in the country.

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