Historic meeting

Penn State baseball plays series in Cuba

A love of baseball

Photo credit: Kelsie Neitzer
Editor’s note: What follows is an introduction to Penn State baseball’s trip to Cuba over Thanksgiving break, along with the game stories and wrapup that were produced as a result of the journey.

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — A Thanksgiving break in Cuba, where Penn State could face off against some of the best baseball talent the world has to offer – it all started in a fundraising meeting.

Last winter, Nittany Lions coach Rob Cooper met with a group of boosters to brainstorm about improvements and future projects for the baseball team. When conversations about an international trip arose, director of the Varsity ‘S’ Club Kirk Diehl suggested Cuba.

“At first, I thought he was kidding,” Cooper said.

Far from it. Within a year, against the backdrop of the warming relations between the United States and its Caribbean neighbor, and with a lot of work, the journey was a reality.

Cooper’s squad made history this November, becoming the first American baseball team to compete on Cuban soil since the restoration of diplomatic ties between the nations. The Nittany Lions played four exhibition games against teams from Cuba’s premier baseball league — the National Series.

Penn State returned to the United States with one victory in hand, though for Cooper winning was never the priority.

“I’m so proud of how the guys played on this trip and excited that they got this experience together,” Cooper said at the team’s media day one week before the flight south.

Off the field, Penn State players enjoyed academic lectures and cultural activities planned by the Center for Marti Studies, the team’s host.

Professor Emeritus of Communications and International Affairs John Nichols referred to the experience as “a tremendous educational opportunity at a critical time.” Nichols has been visiting Cuba since 1971 and worked alongside Diehl and Cooper to plan the trip.

“Taking the track team to Cuba would be a big deal. Or taking the baseball team to Mexico would be a big deal, but taking the baseball team to Cuba is a really big deal,” he said before the tour.

The baseball team was not the only group of Penn Staters to fly to Havana, as eight students from the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism also made the trip.

The Curley Center students spent the week calling games, taking photos and producing both video and print stories for the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association, with their content appearing in at least 10 publications.

Penn State went 1-3 on the journey, suffering two of those losses to the Cuban league’s defending champion, the Ciego de Avila Tigers, and to its oldest club, the Industriales.

“T’m so proud of how the guys played on this trip and excited that they got this experience together,” Cooper said. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for all of us, and it was even more than I thought it would be.”

LEADING THE WAY

At a time of historic change, Penn State baseball plays series in Cuba

BY MADDIE BRIGHTMAN,
ANDY MADORE AND
TYLER FELDMAN
JOHN CURLEY CENTER
HAVANA — The players stood in opposite dugouts, ready to parade out with national flags in hand. Fans honked horns and dance music blared on the PA system.

On a day when a Cuban baseball official said he looked forward to the time his country’s players not only filled MLB rosters, but could also “walk through the airport as you do,” everything seemed set for a celebration.

Then a very Pennsylvania thing happened. The skies opened up.

Fifteen minutes later, Penn State’s much anticipated exhibition game with Cuba’s famed Industriales baseball club at the Estadio Latinoamericano was postponed for a day. The matchup between Cuba’s oldest baseball team and Penn State’s first varsity sport was rescheduled for 1 p.m. Monday.

“It’s a pretty easy thing to get up for; it shouldn’t be a problem for our guys,” Nittany Lions coach Rob Cooper said. “If you aren’t excited to get up and play a team like the Industriales, you shouldn’t even be playing in college.”

A downpour hit about three minutes before the scheduled start. Fans quickly fled their seats to take cover under the venerable stadium’s partial roof.

Groundskeepers placed tarps over the pitcher’s mound and home plate as puddles formed on the rest of the infield.

Earlier on Sunday, the team listened to a lecture from Rodolfo Puente, vice president of the Cuban Federation of Baseball and former national team shortstop, about the history of the sport in Cuba.

Puente talked of a world where he hopes his players will “have the same rights as other people.” For him, lifting the long-standing U.S. trade embargo of his nation seems like the perfect fix to the steady trickle of Cubans defecting from their home country.

Against the backdrop of the two nations normalizing their diplomatic relationship, there have been signs that MLB may return to Cuba for the first time since 1999, when the Baltimore Orioles played an exhibition game in Havana.

Puente sounded upbeat about the future between Cuban baseball and MLB, even praising those who chose defection over a career in his league. “I’m very happy because this talent was formed in Cuba,” he said.

Signs of the baseball-friendly future were displayed throughout the ballpark.

An American flag hung over the visiting dugout, the letters “USA” — in place of “Penn State” — lighted up across the scoreboard and fans strolled into the stadium in a random collection of MLB apparel.

Penn State players also got a taste of baseball, Cuban style, including fans with noisemakers making a ruckus fully half an hour before first pitch was scheduled.

“They were excited to play today, it was a festive atmosphere,” Cooper said. “I want them to experience everything around them culturally because they won't have that when we get back home.”

Rain, rain …

Penn State’s Tyler Kendall, left, scraped mud from his cleats as he and teammates Nick Hedge, center, and Jack Anderson waited in the dugout during a rain delay at the Estadio Latinoamericano in Havana, Cuba, on Sunday Nov. 22.
Havana — Once the national anthems were played and the flags put away, one of Cuban baseball’s best clubs, the Industriales, came away with a 2-1 win Monday against a surprisingly competitive Penn State team.

It was just an exhibition game, the first for the Nittany Lions in an unprecedented series against teams from Cuba’s national league, but it also served as a moment to mark the thaw in relations between this island country and the United States.

A young Cuban girl carried a banner reading “Estados Unidos” as she led coach Rob Cooper and his team onto the field at the Estadio Latinoamericano, the most famous ballpark in a nation where baseball is by far the most popular sport.

Junior Christian Helsel carried the U.S. flag as he and his teammates marched along the first base path.

Penn State designated hitter Nick Riotto (12) was tagged out at second base by Industriales shortstop Jorge Alomá during an attempted steal in the top of the fourth inning during the team’s game against the Industriales at Estadio Latinoamericano in Havana, Cuba on Monday, Nov. 22. The Industriales beat Penn State 2-1.
baseline. The Industriales joined the Nittany Lions on the third baseline.

Industriales’ fans stood together and sang as their country’s national anthem blared over the stadium’s speakers. Moments later, sounds of “The Star-Spangled Banner” resonated through the stands — a rare event in the half century since the country’s Communist regime took power.

The game was postponed for 24 hours after a downpour Sunday that sent fans running for cover. A light weekday crowd experienced a scare as rain picked up three minutes from first pitch — the exact time the skies opened up a day before.

Monday’s game went ahead despite occasional showers. Cooper and Industriales skipper Javier Mendez swapped lineups, but the exchange felt like more than the trading of scorecards. The managers shook hands and Cooper left the home plate meeting with an Industriales jersey.

“It was cool to hear their national anthem and see the Cubans’ pride for their country,” Cooper said. “But anytime you hear our national anthem in another country, it is a different feeling. It was a very special moment to be a part of.”

Coach Rob Cooper

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Photo credit: Kelsie Netzer

Top: Penn State head baseball coach Rob Cooper (16) talks to Industriales’ coach Javier Mendez after the Nittany Lions’ 2-1 loss at at Estadio Latinoamericano on Monday, Nov. 22. Above: Penn State relief pitcher Nick Distasio delivered a pitch during the teams first game against the Industriales. Distasio only allowed two hits during his four innings on the mound.
HAVANA — Penn State lost 2-0 on Wednesday to the defending Cuban league champion, Ciego de Ávila, as its bats were again stifled by some of the best pitchers this country has to offer.

The game was the second of a four-stop tour for Penn State in Cuba, a rare opportunity for a U.S. college team. The Nittany Lions lost 2-1 Monday to the nation’s most famous club, the Industriales, but that squad was largely made up of subs and young prospects.

This time out, Penn State faced the starters on a team that currently holds the best record in Cuba at 30-12.

Much like Monday’s matchup against the Industriales, Penn State fell behind in the first inning before shutting down Ciego de Ávila’s bats for long stretches. Starter Sal Biasi effectively settled into a rhythm on the mound.

“I thought the first inning I was rushing a little bit, but I was able to get ahead in the count following that,” Biasi said.

Raul Gonzalez’s one-out double gave the Tigers an early scoring opportunity. He advanced to third on a Biasi wild pitch, then crossed the plate on a RBI groundout from José García. It proved to be the only run they would need.

Frustration set in following the first inning for Ciego de Ávila, as Biasi went on to retire seven straight batters.

Tiger players seemed upset with their performances, swinging early in the count and shaking their heads at the female home plate umpire when a call did not go their way.

The trip has served so far as an interesting snapshot of the relative abilities of players from U.S. college baseball and Cuba’s top league. While Penn State — which started four freshman Wednesday — has been competitive, the Nittany Lions can’t seem to buy a run when it counts.

“Cuba is renovating its game,” said Cuban sports broadcaster Evyan Guerra.

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“Cuba is renovating its game,” said
Evan Guerra, a sports broadcaster for a Cuban television network. “We are trying to better prepare our players and increase the level of our game.”

Tigers pitcher Vladimir García, who is the ace of the staff with a 1.94 ERA on the season, dominated through five frames of work. He finished with nine strikeouts, recording five in a row between the second and third innings.

“He’s not just one of the best in Cuba, he’s one of the best in the world,” said Penn State head coach Rob Cooper. “Our guys showed no fear and I am proud of that.”

The Nittany Lions’ best scoring opportunity came in the fourth inning. Penn State got a leadoff man on with a broken-bat infield single from Greg Guers. Two batters later, Tyler Kendall was hit in the arm on a Garcia fastball.

A two-out double steal by Guers and Kendall caught the Tigers by surprise, putting two runners in scoring position, but freshman Austin Riggins was unable to put the ball in play, whiffing on a 3-2 fastball.

Luis Robert, whose emotions were running high after two strikeouts to start the game, added an RBI double in the seventh to give the Tigers an insurance run.

In the eighth, a Jordan Bowersox single set up Penn State’s best power hitter with a chance to tie the game, but Guers’ drive to right got snagged on the warning track. “Off the bat, I thought it was a tie ball game,” Guers said.

“It’s a great experience overall,” he added. “But it’s an even better baseball experience.”

Penn State catcher Ryan Sloniger (11) receives a throw from left fielder Nick Riotto to tag out Ciego De Ávila shortstop Yorbis Borroto at home plate during the Nittany Lions’ game at Estadio Latinoamericano in Havana, Cuba on Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2015. The Ciego De Ávila Tigers beat Penn State 2-0.
Life in Cuba

Tourists ride in an iconic U.S. car, now primarily used as taxis, outside of the Revolution Square in Havana, Cuba. Standing behind is a cube memorial of Camilo Cienfuegos, a Cuban revolutionary.

A boy watches baseball players warm up from the outside of the field in Havana, Cuba.

A young Cuban boy jugs his bike across a grass field behind the Estadio de la Solidaridad, Havana, Cuba.

A supermarket in Old Havana.

A man works on his car on the side of the street in Old Havana, Cuba.

A young Cuban boy watches his schoolwork while his classmates play basketball at morning recess before the start of classes in Havana, Cuba, on Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2015.

Photo credit: Cameron Han
S AN JOSE DE LAS LAJAS, Cuba — Thanks to a seven-run second inning outburst — capped by a Nick Riotto bases-clearing triple — Penn State baseball picked up the best souvenir it could’ve asked for while in Cuba, a 9-3 win over Mayabeque on a gorgeous Friday afternoon at Estadio Nelson Fernandez.

The Nittany Lions were winless and had managed to score just one run through 19 innings of play in Cuba, but that all changed in the 20th frame against the Hurricanes. Riotto, a junior from Washington, Pa., walked to start the inning and Alex Malinsky followed with a bunt down the first base line that Mayabeque starting pitcher Essiel Fuentes bobbled, setting up Penn State with runners on first and second.

Freshman Austin Riggins loaded the bases on a seeing-eye single through first and second, and Keith Leavitt recorded the first RBI of his Penn State baseball career on a walk.

Altoona product Christian Helsel then smacked a hard ground ball up the middle to score Malinsky and give the Nittany Lions their first lead in Cuba, 2-1.

Following a Mayabeque pitching change, Conlin Hughes walked to bring in Riggins. A Jim Haley sacrifice fly to left field allowed Leavitt to tag up and score easily, pushing Penn State’s lead to 4-1. A Greg Guers pop out in foul territory to the Hurricanes catcher and another walk, this time to Tyler Kendall, set up Riotto’s second at-bat of the inning.

Digging into the left-handed batters box, Riotto ripped the 1-0 pitch past the diving outfielder in right to clear the bases and give Penn State a 7-1 advantage.

“It was big … especially in a bases-loaded situation to get multiple runs,” Riotto said. “Getting that lead early was the best thing we could’ve done.”

For the third straight game however, Penn State gave up a run in the first inning. Alex Pozo scored on a single by cleanup hitter Yansiel Gonzalez to put the Hurricanes up 1-0.

Starting their four-game exhibition tour in Cuba with close losses to Havana’s Industriales and defending national champion Ciego de Ávila, Penn State broke through playing in a country town about 15 miles east of Havana.

The pocket-sized ballpark featured an older man selling homemade fried dough from a plastic container, a young fan strolling through the stands carrying a rusty cage with a pet bird inside, a stray dog napping in the glistening sun along the first base side, and even a lone Penn State fan, originally from Pittsburgh, sporting a Ben Roethlisberger jersey.

The Nittany Lions got plenty of help from the Hurricanes pitching staff, which
Struggled with control all day and issued 12 walks. Mayabeque has been stuck near the bottom of the National Series standings this year with an 11-33 record.

Still, Mayabeque tightened the game with two runs in the bottom half of the sixth, but a majestic home run over the left field wall from Helsel gave the Nittany Lions one back and made it 8-3.

The Blue and White would tack on one more via a Kendall hot shot down the right field line to win by six runs.

"It was a pretty cool experience," Helsel said about the homer. "Guers and I have been joking about it since he's hit a couple in BP and all the locals loved him, and now I'm the new favorite, which is pretty funny."

Head coach Rob Cooper spoke with his players down the right field line for about 20 minutes after the win, while a crowd of young Cuban baseball fans waited outside the stadium gate for a chance to meet them. The victory is believed to be the first by a U.S. team playing against a National Series club.

"That's a special thing," Cooper said. "It's something that they'll be able to talk about for the rest of their lives. I was just told that is the first win by an outside team in a series national league ever, so we literally made history."

Penn State dropped the final game of its four-game exhibition tour of Cuba, a 15-2 loss to Matanzas in which the Nittany Lions committed six errors.

Penn State wound up with a 1-3 record during its weeklong visit to the Caribbean island over Thanksgiving break, becoming the first American team to earn a victory against a club in Cuba's premier baseball league.

The first two games Penn State played, with Havana’s Industriales and first-place team Ciego de Avila, were broadcast on Cuban television.

The game against Matanzas on Saturday was the second tilt the Nittany Lions played outside the city of Havana after knocking off Mayabeque, 9-3, on Friday.

Blunders proved costly for Penn State. Its six errors led to 10 unearned runs for the Crocodiles. A trio of Matanzas players finished the game with three RBIs each.

“We just did not play the game well at all,” Penn State head coach Rob Cooper said, shortly after the team landed in Miami on Sunday. “We had six errors in the game and it should have probably been 10 or 11 if the game was scored properly.”

Penn State fell behind in the first inning of every game but, overall, the matchup against Mantazas was the only one in which the Nittany Lions were not competitive.

With decades of political tension between the United States and Cuba easing, the tour seemed to demonstrate that a program at a major U.S. college could make a decent showing against club teams in a nation long known as a baseball powerhouse.

The direct impact of the series on baseball’s future in Cuba is unknown, though both a travel agent and minor league team executive dropped in at games.

For the Nittany Lions, who flew back to the United States on Sunday, the tour helped develop some comradery within a young team that features 12 freshmen.

The extra practice and game experience received because of this trip puts Penn State ahead of the curve in terms of repetitions, which will benefit the Lions as they approach the start of their regular season.

"It was a once in a lifetime experience for all of us and it was even more than I thought it would be," Cooper said. “Our guys felt a special bond with the people of Cuba, it was tough to leave.”

Freshman outfielder Jordan Bowersox led the team in hits on the trip with five, starting and batting leadoff in three of the four games played. Redshirt junior Christian Helsel blasted the only home run of the week during Friday’s matchup vs. Mayabeque.

Penn State’s 2016 season starts Feb. 19 in Cary, N.C., for the USA Baseball Complex Tournament.

Maddie Brightman, Andy Madore and Tyler Feldman all are students in the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State. Brightman wrote the introduction and the accounts of the rainout and Industriales game; Madore wrote the wrap up and the Ciego de Avila game story; and, Feldman contributed the account of the Mayabeque game.
HAVANA — “Comienza la pasion!”
“Let the passion begin!” It’s what Cuban sports broadcaster Evyan Guerra says before the start of every game.

That same word, passion, works its way into answer upon answer when fans are asked, “What does baseball mean to you?” But what constitutes passion in a country that touts baseball as its national sport, and — at the same time — is a place Americans know so little about? Is it the dedication of a fan travelling to away games? Is it the desire of an umpire who calls games because she can no longer play? Or is it the player who sacrifices his personal life to be part of a team that eats, sleeps and plays together?

And what does it reveal about our Caribbean neighbor?

During a week spent in and around Havana last November, Penn State’s baseball team — on an exhibition tour, playing teams from the nation’s top league — got a chance to see up close how baseball weaves itself into the lives of the Cuban people. So did students from the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism, who made the journey to cover the Nittany Lions.

This story is about what they found.
Ciego de Ávila fan Moisés Almanza Poyato, in the red hat, cheers for his team during Penn State’s second game at Estadio Latinoamericano in Havana, Cuba.
IN THE STANDS

It started in the morning as the teams arrived at Estadio Latinoamericano, Cuba’s most famous ballpark. Fans waited outside the stadium to see players and coaches pile off the bus and into their locker room.

Boys in mismatching shorts and T-shirts approached the Penn State players, asking for autographs and hoping to receive a ball or hat from the Americans — tall, fit college students, whose names the slender children did not know.

The gates opened two hours before the first pitch, and soon there was a steady trickle of fans into the stadium, surely a grand place when it opened in 1946 but now showing its age after thousands of games. One fan was, in a sense, already there. A bronze statue dedicated to a Cuban baseball lover sat in the Dodger blue seats on the third base side of home plate.

He, however, was no match for the real fans. Going to the game seemed as natural to them as walking down the street, whether it was in Havana or outside it. No matter the venue, the scene was unquestionably more DIY than in an American ballpark, even a minor league one.

Vendors walked around trying to yell over fans’ loud horns in hopes of selling homemade popcorn and bags of nuts. Every so often, a spectator would purchase a treat for less than a dollar, a real contrast to prices in American stadiums.

On the concourse of the Estadio Latinoamericano, the snack stand looked something like a small tailgate. It was a long table with food set out and a small grill off to the side. Servers in black aprons waited on customers who read the menu off a posterboard. Just a few steps away, tucked in a small opening leading back to the field, was a souvenir shop with Industriales shirts and hats ranging in price depending on whether the customer was Cuban or a tourist.

In Mayabeque, where Penn State won its only game of the tour, a dog napped in the aisle behind the first base dugout, and a child walked into the maroon stands holding a rusty cage with a tropical bird inside it.

Some of the fans were boys dressed in their school uniforms, racing to be the first in the ballpark, located about an hour outside of Havana.

Other youngsters propped themselves over the top of a fence down the right field line to watch from a different angle, but after a short time, they ran off to play their own sandlot games behind the stadium.

No billboards with ads were anywhere to be seen, just a dozen Cuban flags waving behind left field, a symbol aimed at tying love for the game to love for the country.

When Penn State visited Havana, any fan who had one, it seemed, was decked out in a baseball T-shirt or an uniform replica, even if it was well worn. Most bore the logo of a Cuban or Major League Baseball team, from the Nationals to the Rays.

One fan, Joel Elejalde, cheered for the Industriales, Cuba’s equivalent of the Yankees, though he put on a Boston Red Sox jersey when the Nittany Lions came to town. He said he “discovered” baseball in 1993 as he was exploring the radio dial.

“I do all my chores at home, for example, always listening to baseball on the radio,” the 39-year-old said, looking out as the Industriales warmed up.

“Baseball for me and my family is the air that we breathe,” the mother of two said. The street merchant, who sported a Marlins hat, said that he wears any baseball gear that he is able to get and, despite donning the jerseys of different teams, one thing remains constant: Baseball is everything to him.

Yamilda Perez referred to baseball as the core of Cuba’s identity and makes it a point to attend every game the Industriales play.

“Baseball for me and my family is the air that we breathe,” the mother of two said.

Directly below her, Perez’s son kicked a ball on the concourse. Next to him stood a 77-year-old woman who has cleaned the stadium for more than a quarter century.

Wearing a bright yellow shirt and a big smile on her face, Perez explained how
she and her family follow the team to away games and have taken many photos with players over the years.

“Without baseball, we are nothing,” said Perez, watching as the teams lined up to hear their national anthems.

Perez, her children, and those around began to rise. The announcer came on, and the music started to play as the Cuban and United States flags blew in the wind.

FROM THE PRESS BOX

Once the ceremonies ended, and the teams trooped back to their dugouts, Guerra — the broadcaster — cleared his throat and began with his catchphrase. “The passion” was underway.

For Guerra and others in the media, love for the game is their everyday work. They spend hours studying, watching and talking about baseball.

After Guerra realized he wasn’t good enough to play, he decided to write about baseball in college. Since then, he has worked his way up to becoming a broadcaster for the Cuban sports network Telerebelde.

“And it has been 10 years now,” he said through a translator.

Life in a Cuban broadcast booth is similar to the United States, where the on-air talent is supposed to stay impartial no matter whom they cheer for off-duty. Guerra said he puts his emotions aside when it’s time to work, even if he’s calling a game involving the Cuban national team.

Press row at the Estadio Latinoamericano is not a hermetically sealed booth at the top of the stadium, but the box seats between home plate and the first base dugout, just past the point where fans are protected from foul balls by netting.

It’s here that Antonio Diaz Susavila of the Cuban Baseball Press Bureau surrounds himself with the sport.

On average, he spends eight to 10 hours a day watching, listening to and reporting on baseball, with his stories running on the official website for the National Series, the country’s top league.

“Baseball is a great passion to all Cubans,” he said. “We live it and enjoy it.”

Indeed, Diaz said, studying the game grabs his attention even when he goes home. Standing next to his wife in press row, he quipped that baseball is “the other woman” in his life.

Diaz spends his days travelling all around Cuba to games and meetings, acting as both a spokesman for the national baseball federation and a reporter on the sport. During Penn State’s matchup against the Industriales, he shook hands with person after person who came to visit, occasionally stopping to zero in on the action.

Not only has Diaz had the opportunity to travel throughout Cuba, but the game has taken him to other places around the world, including the United States. Last summer, for example, he traveled to Cary, N.C., with the Cuban national team as it competed in a pre-Pan American Games tournament.

HOT CORNER

Diaz and Guerra aren’t the only ones who voice their opinions on baseball, they just get to do so on a big stage. It has been said that every Cuban is a coach of baseball. Each person has his or her thoughts on what to do and how to play the game.

And there is no better place to hear...
about baseball in the heart of Havana than at La Esquina Caliente.

La Esquina Caliente, literally “The Hot Corner,” is a spot right downtown in Central Park where people from all around Cuba come to discuss and argue about their favorite players, teams and who should have done what when.

Surrounded by tourists and by buildings that evoke the city’s Spanish colonial past, people of all ages spend anywhere from a few minutes to hours arguing — loudly — about baseball. To the untrained eye, it can often look like a fight is about to break out among a small cluster of men. But not to worry.

“We argue about who bats the best and who fields the most, who catches the most, who hits the most home runs, who plays the most innings, and who plays the best.”

Lois Hardy

ON THE FIELD

But what about the people on the field: the players, the umps, and the coaches? “For me baseball is everything,” said Jayner Rodriguez Armas, a Mayabeque pitcher, after his team fell to Penn State, 9-3. “It is what I like the best, it’s where I feel free.”

He spends hours a day training with teammates. It is a job, and one that is taken very seriously in Cuba. Rodriguez will be criticized if he fails to perform well — all players will, and so will the umpires.

Being a female ump is particularly tough in a game most often played by men. But, like others, Janet Moreno Mendinueta says baseball is her life. In fact, she has been around baseball from the time she was born.

“My father used to live behind right field of the Latinoamericano,” Moreno said, pointing over her left shoulder. He also used to bring her to baseball games as a child and feed her a bottle while in the stands.

“I would fall asleep and the roar of the crowd wouldn’t wake me up,” explained the ump. “I would sleep soundly until the next day.”

Moreno played competitively until she became too old to participate in the Cuban system for women’s baseball. Being an umpire was the only way to stay involved in the game.

AMERICAN VIEW

For the man leading Penn State on its four-game journey, it wasn’t hard to pick up on Cubans’ feelings about baseball. “I think they are definitely a group that loves to play,” coach Rob Cooper said, smiling.

Cooper said the teams his Nittany Lions played were extremely skilled and smooth.

“It’s a way for them to express themselves and who they are as people,” he said. “And, you know, I think that any time you are really passionate about something, it’s gonna come out in what you do.”

As for the fans, Cooper said, “they might have been rooting for, say, their home team, but they respected and enjoyed good baseball, so they would cheer good plays even if it wasn't in their favor.”

During Penn State’s game against defending league champs Ciego de Ávila in Havana, the Nittany Lions were down by two runs in the eighth inning. With a man on first, Penn State senior Greg Guears hit a long fly ball that the right fielder sprinted to catch on the warning track.

“It looked like it might be a two-run home run to tie it, and as he is coming off, they gave him a standing ovation,” Cooper said. “You don’t normally get a standing ovation for an out.”

Except that, in Cuba, you do.