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A Hit Out of the Park

Local Athletes Travel to Cuba for a Senior Softball Tournament

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Cuban and American players listening to the Star Spangled Banner at the opening ceremony.

The Havana sun glints off the gold medal around my father's neck. He smiles as proudly as if he, rather than the man grinning next to him, were the Olympic champion. Standing in the outfield with his arm around 1976 double-gold-winning runner Alberto Juantorena, Michael Eizenberg, my father, celebrates something more lasting than victory: friendship. In that sense, everyone at the November 2009 Cuban and American senior softball tournament was a winner.

Eizenberg, a sixty-two-year-old Wellesley resident, first traveled to Cuba in 1998 as

a Bentley College researcher, and even today the island brings out a youthful wonder in him. He gets that same joy from playing third base in the Eastern Massachusetts Senior Softball League (EMASS), diligently tracking his batting average and regularly scraping up his knees. So when he conceived the possibility of uniting the two in a softball tournament, it was as much for the sheer fun of it as for the significance of bringing together these long separated people.

Eizenberg works as a Travel Service Provider (TSP), making Cuban travel arrangements for licensed visitors. He pitched the Cuban tournament to League Commissioner Stu Gray, sixty-eight, who embraced the idea as an exciting new opportunity for his players. Fifty-four men and two women, ranging in age from fifty-seven to seventy-six, signed up the night the trip was announced. The league obtained an Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) public performance license, the same category under which the Baltimore Orioles played in Cuba in 1999. Francisco Grass, a tour operator, helped plan the trip from the Cuban side, garnering official support for the program. "We had several meetings with the Ministry of Athletics and the Cuban Federation of Softball," said Grass, "and everyone was very enthusiastic." The Cubans recruited senior players, reserved the fields, and distributed the newly translated EMASS rules.

The EMASS teams brought uniforms for their opponents, blue jerseys emblazoned with "Cuba" and hats bearing Cuban and American flags. Eizenberg arrived with ten boxes of equipment, but was waved through customs once he explained the tournament. When he went to inspect the fields, he found a "fifty-five-year-old guy cutting the grass with a scythe. His back hurt afterwards, but he still umpired a few days later." Eizenberg explains, "Everyone wanted the event to be perfect. Everyone wanted to be part of it."

Having witnessed the entirety of U.S.-Cuban relations since the Cuban Revolution, the American players were unsure of what to expect. "I guess I was anticipating a heavy police and military presence and a somber atmosphere," says Keith Gross, a sixty-one-year-old catcher from Weston. Other players wondered whether they would be treated with respect or resentment.



Alberto Juantorena and Michael Eizenberg.

One Saturday last November, they were greeted in the airy hotel lobby by signs reading *Bienvenidos a los atletas*—





The EMASS B Team

front row (l to r): Alan Joseph, Gary Siegel, Les Gore, Mike Sobol, Dick Willis, John O'Rourke; back row (l to r): Rich Morris, Larry Schwartz, Tom Klem, Mike Mard, Jim Leonard, Glenn Shambroom, Jim Raymond, Mike Eizenberg

Welcome athletes— and bellmen wearing official tournament hats. Any trepidation they felt quickly evaporated. "The freedom and friendliness of the people was surprising and refreshing," says Gross. "We were made to feel completely welcome and like we were old friends." Walking through the narrow streets of old Havana, the players were stopped by people who had seen them on Cuban TV. In the shadows of beautifully ornate but weary looking buildings, people pointed at their hats and gave them the thumbs up, or shook their hands and thanked them for coming. The athletes had truly arrived.

When the EMASS busses pulled into the sports complex on Monday morning, the Cuban players scrambled down from the stands to meet them. With similarly spry enthusiasm, the Americans rushed off the bus to meet their counterparts in a patch of freshly cut grass. "There was no ice to be broken," says Eizenberg, "because we were all like a bunch of kids eager to play ball." Handshakes, greetings, and introductions trampled the language barrier. Sixty-five-year-old Wayland centerfielder John Darack explains, "Those guys just seemed so anxious to get to know us that all the political stuff was left in the dirt."



Team USA

Team USA, a mix of Cuban and American members of the B teams

For the opening ceremony, the players lined up World Series style: EMASS players stretched along the first-base line and Cuban players on the third-base line, converging at home plate. Their hats over their hearts, Cubans and Americans alike listened as a ceremonial band played the Cuban national anthem, *El Himno de Bayamo*. A few moments of nervous silence followed, like a collective drawing of breath. The opening notes of the *Star Spangled Banner* rang in the air, and the American players found themselves singing along with tears in their eyes. Says Darack, "I felt more emotional in that moment than I can remember feeling about anything in a while." A live rendition of the American anthem is such a rarity in Cuba that even the Orioles heard only a tinny recording. For the final bit of fanfare, world champion boxer Teófilo Stevenson

hurled out the ceremonial first pitch, which Eizenberg caught in a boxing glove. Stevenson signed the glove for Eizenberg, and then asked for a signed softball in return. Eizenberg happily obliged.

The EMASS players arrived much better equipped than the Cubans, some of whom didn't have gloves, so the Americans tossed theirs to the Cubans as they jogged in from the field. Gross gave three extra gloves to Cuban captain Ramón Macola Olana for distribution among his players. In gratitude, Olana gave Gross his prized baseball possession, a jersey worn by Fermin Laffita, Cuban batting champion in the 1975 National Series. A few of the Cuban players played in sneakers that had been duct-taped together, or in canvas slip-on shoes. Darack had brought an extra pair of cleats, and on the second day he gave them to Carlos Lopez, who had been playing in torn sneakers. "The next day, Carlos came over to our dugout with a bag holding a gift-wrapped present. It was a vase his wife had made." The vase now resides on Darack's desk, holding a softball that traveled to Cuba and back.



The rest of the week unfolded with games in the morning, cultural activities in the afternoon, and occasional beers in the evening, when the American and Cuban players would swap stories and share family photographs. The games themselves were fairly even, with the Cuban teams improving as they adjusted to the EMASS rules: slow pitch, eleven-in-the-field, and two home plates and first bases. Says Commissioner Gray, a pitcher, "They were excellent baseball players who played effortlessly and gracefully—formidable opponents."



Certainly the players remember their athletic highlights: Gray's grand slam, Gross's RBI that made Cuban television, Eizenberg's double over the head of Juantorena, and Cuban pitcher Jorge Rodriguez Rubio's first-game victory. But they spoke with far more passion about the relationships that developed between them. As Rodriguez Rubio said, "The final



Michael Eizenberg catches Teófilo Stevenson's ceremonial first pitch.

results were not important; we all really enjoyed the games. By the last day we were like old friends." Even the B and the C teams, which went into their final games tied at three apiece, voted to play their last games with mixed Cuban and American teams. So they drew gloves to determine who would be on each team, then swapped shirts accordingly. Soon, Cuban players were chanting, "U-S-A!" and Americans were shouting "Cu-ba! Cu-ba!"

as they cheered for their newly designated teammates. No one bothered to keep score. Like kids leaving camp, they signed each other's jerseys with Sharpies, turning their uniforms into souvenirs.



The EMASS B Team in the visitors dugout

On the final day, the American players left everything behind—gloves, bats, balls, cleats, and jerseys. Some left the field bare-chested in their stocking feet. Michael Frank, sixty-eight, runs a little league in Jamaica Plain, and brought a box of kids' equipment. Gross donated little league gloves and bats to the oncology department at Havana Hospital. Seventy-five-year-old George Chan even packed a tiny bit of dirt from his pitcher's mound in Wayland into the Cuban mound. But their new Cuban friends gave gifts, too: postcards, handicrafts, and baseball memorabilia. Many of the players traded e-mail addresses, and have since exchanged photographs, memories, and holiday wishes.

While the tournament may not signal an overall thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations, everyone agreed that it was a step in the right direction. Gloria F. Berbena, Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana called the event "exactly the kind of thing that is needed in our bilateral relationship." Cuban organizer Grass agrees that such programs "help increase the possibility of normal relations between the two countries."

As Eizenberg puts it, "We're our own best goodwill ambassadors." The tournament was special in that it allowed people to really get to know each other as people. While humanitarian programs in Cuba are essential, they don't foster a sense of equality. Meeting on the diamond put the players on level footing, making relationships possible. "Understanding each other is the first step to normalizing official relationships between Cuba and the USA," says Rodriguez Rubio, the Cuban pitcher.



EMASS and Cuban players shake hands after a game.

Eizenberg and Gray plan to repeat the EMASS Cuba tournament annually, and Eizenberg hopes to develop similar programs in soccer, volleyball, and basketball. Talks are even underway to bring the Cuban softball players to the U.S. for a tournament in Massachusetts. "We felt like we hit one out of the park," says Eizenberg, "or pitched the perfect game. It was like being a kid again: we didn't want the sun to go down; we didn't want to stop playing ball. We didn't want it to end."