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RAUSCH, JANE M.

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## The Development of Baseball in Colombia —A Caribbean Anomaly?

*El desarrollo del béisbol en Colombia, ¿una anomalía caribeña?*

*O desenvolvimento do beisebol na Colômbia, ¿uma anomalia caribenha?*

### JANE M. RAUSCH

Professor emerita earned a B.A. at DePauw University (1962) and her M.A. (1964) and Ph.D. (1969) at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She joined the History Department at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 1969 where she taught Latin American History until her retirement in May 2010. A specialist in Colombian history and comparative frontier regions, she is the author of several books. Her most recent publications are *Colombia and the Transformation of the Llanos Orientales* (2013); *Colombia and World War I: The Experience of a Neutral Latin American Nation during the Great War and Its Aftermath, 1914-1921* (2014), and *Santiago Pérez Triana (1858-1916): Colombian Man of Letters and Crusader for Hemispheric Unity* (2017).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6653-5524>

Correo electrónico: [jrausch@history.umass.edu](mailto:jrausch@history.umass.edu)



## Abstract

In the aftermath of the Cuban-Spanish-American War, US influence rapidly increased throughout the Caribbean. Its quasi-control of the region sparked a virulent nationalism combining a mix of anti-Americanism along with adoption of aspects of American culture. Baseball, for example, proved to have irresistible appeal throughout the region. Eventually, the peoples of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Panama joined Cubans in their enthusiasm for the sport. Although the US never invaded Colombia, baseball spawned a following in its Caribbean region as well, but passion for the sport did not engulf the entire country. The objective of this paper is two-fold: first, to trace the development of Colombian baseball before 1960, and second: to explain why Colombian players have failed to achieve the stature of their Caribbean counterparts in the 20th and 21st centuries.

*Keywords: Sport, baseball, Caribbean, US-Colombian relations.*

## Resumen

Después de la guerra cubano-hispano-estadounidense, la influencia estadounidense aumentó rápidamente en todo el Caribe. Su cuasicontrol de la región desencadenó un nacionalismo virulento que combinó una mezcla de antiamericanismo junto con la adopción de aspectos de la cultura estadounidense. El béisbol, por ejemplo, demostró tener un atractivo irresistible en toda la región. Los pueblos de Puerto Rico, República Dominicana, México, Nicaragua, Venezuela y Panamá se unieron a los cubanos en su entusiasmo por el deporte. Aunque los Estados Unidos nunca invadió Colombia, el béisbol también generó un seguimiento en su región caribeña, pero la pasión por el deporte no envolvió a todo el país. El objetivo de este documento es doble: primero, trazar el desarrollo del béisbol colombiano antes de 1960, y segundo: explicar por qué los jugadores colombianos no han logrado la estatura de sus homólogos caribeños en los siglos 20 y XXI.

*Palabras claves: Deporte, béisbol, Caribe, relaciones entre Estados Unidos y Colombia.*

## Resumo

Após a Guerra Cubano-Hispânico-Americano, a influência americana aumentou rapidamente em todo o Caribe. Seu quase controle da região desencadeou um nacionalismo virulento que combinava uma mistura de antiamericanismo junto com a adoção de aspectos da cultura americana. O beisebol, por exemplo, mostrou-se irresistível em toda a região. Os povos de Porto Rico, República Dominicana, México, Nicarágua, Venezuela e Panamá se juntaram aos cubanos em seu entusiasmo pelo esporte. Embora os Estados Unidos nunca tenham invadido a Colômbia, o beisebol também gerou um acompanhamento em sua região caribenha, mas a paixão pelo esporte não envolveu todo o país. O objetivo deste documento é duplo: primeiro, traçar o desenvolvimento do beisebol colombiano antes de 1960, e segundo: explicar por que os jogadores colombianos não atingiram a estatura de seus homólogos caribenhos nos séculos XX e XXI.

*Palavras chave: Esportes, beisebol, Caribe, relações EUA-Colômbia.*

Historian Charles Bergquist once remarked that Colombia does not fit the stereotypes or “models” conventionally used in discussions of Latin America since it is a country where military dictators are almost unknown, the political left has been congenitally weak, and such phenomena as urbanization and industrialization has failed to spawn a “populist” movement of lasting consequence. (Bergquist, cited by Bushnell, 1993, viii). Bergquist’s generalization applies as well to Colombia’s sports history, for instead of wholeheartedly embracing fútbol as its national pastime as occurred in many of its South American neighbors, Colombian enthusiasm for particular sports developed along regional distinctions. Thus, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century boxing and baseball attracted the largest following along its Caribbean coast, while a passion for bicycle racing emerged in the Andean regions, and it was not until the 1980s that fútbol gained aficionados throughout the country to become a truly “national” sport (L’Hoeste, 2015, 85-86).

Baseball was an aspect of North American culture that proved to have irresistible appeal throughout the Caribbean. The game, made attractive by its leisurely pace, low cost, and association with more politically and economically progressive societies, arrived in Cuba as early as the 1870s when it was introduced by US sailors, engineers, educators and military personnel. In the aftermath of the Cuban-Spanish-American War of 1898, US influence rapidly increased throughout the Caribbean. Its quasi-control of the new Panamanian and Cuban Republics, and its support of dictatorial rule in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, had the unintended consequence of sparking a virulent nationalism in those countries that combined a curious mix of anti-Americanism along with the adoption of aspects of American culture. (Keen and Hayes, 2004, 528). Eventually, the people of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Panama joined Cubans in their enthusiastic adoption of baseball, leaping into international competitions and eventually exporting some of their most proficient players to the US Major Leagues (Arbena, in Tenebaum, 1996, 171).

In 1903 the United States actively encouraged Panama to revolt, but it never invaded Colombia. Baseball soon developed a following in Colombia’s Caribbean region, but unlike the islands and Central American nations, its impact was not promoted by US-supported dictators, and passion for the sport did not engulf the entire country. In fact, after the demise of the Colombian Professional Baseball League in 1958, national interest seems to have virtually disappeared, replaced first by the emergence of bicycle racing (*ciclismo*) and later, fútbol (L’Hoeste, 2015,

86-87). After reviewing the literature relating to the history of Colombian baseball and the general characteristics of Colombia's Caribbean region, the objective of this essay is to two-fold: first, to trace the development of Colombian baseball before 1958, and second: to ascertain why national baseball teams in the latter half of the twentieth century failed to achieve the stature of their Venezuelan and Dominican counterparts.

## Studies of Colombian Baseball

Scholars from Cartagena have provided the most insight into the development of Colombian baseball. Foremost is Raul Porto Cabrales who has traced baseball's history on the Caribbean coast in four important books: *Historia del béisbol aficionado de Colombia* (2000); *Historia de béisbol profesional de Colombia* (2002); *El deporte en Cartagena de Indias* (2008); and *Memoria histórica del béisbol de Bolívar y Cartagena, 1874-1948* (2013). Also helpful are Riola García's Ph.d. thesis, "Béisbol, cultura y sociabilidad en Cartagena," (2015), Nieto Ibáñez, *Genesis del béisbol profesional colombiano* (2010), and Manuel Morales Fontanilla's paper (2029), "Campeones, Costeños, y Machos: La series mundial de béisbol y el lugar de lo Caribe durante los años 1940s en Colombia".

By contrast, Forero Nogales, in his forty-page overview of Colombian sports in the *Nueva Historia de Colombia* 6 vols. (1989), allots just three pages to baseball. Galvis (1997), in *Grandes hazañas deportivas de Colombia*, assigns only three of one hundred great Colombian sporting triumphs to baseball episodes, while Fernández L'Hoeste (2015), in his essay "Race, Sport, and Regionalism in the Construction of Colombian Nationalism" chooses to focus on boxing rather than baseball when discussing sport in the Caribbean region.

Numerous studies that offer composite views of baseball's history in the Caribbean note that the first Hispanic ballplayer to appear in the US Major leagues was Colombia's Louis "Jud" Castro who played second base for the Philadelphia Athletics in 1902, the year the Athletics won the America League pennant and the 1902 World Series, but the Athletics released Castro after that season, and he never again appeared in the majors. With this tip of the hat to Colombia, the country disappears from further discussion as the authors turn their attention to charting the explosion of baseball in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

## Colombia's Caribbean

The Caribbean region of Colombia encompasses some 100,000 sq. km. and extends from Panama to the Guajira Peninsula. Politically, it includes the departments of Antioquia, Córdoba, Sucre, Atlántico, Magdalena and Guajira, as well as the islands of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina. Physiographically, it consists of low hills, one high mountain region, and many flattish alluvial basins. Of these, the wide marshy flood plain and delta of the lower Magdalena is the largest, forming the central part of the lowlands West, 1962) 3-4). Besides cattle ranching, the region supports a variety of tropical agriculture including rice, cotton, bananas, and sugar cane. A sugar central built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century capable of processing 20 tons of sugar a day was the largest in size in all Colombia (Eder, 1911, 190).

In contrast to the island nations, however, Colombia's Caribbean region includes only about 11 percent of the 1,138,400 square kilometers of its geographically diverse territory. Rugged topography divides the country into two distinct parts. The Andean Cordillera dominates the western third with its three high ranges running north and south, separated by the deep longitudinal valleys of the Cauca and Magdalena rivers. This highland section is fringed on the north by the Atlantic/Caribbean coast and on the west by the Pacific coastal lowlands. The remaining two thirds of the country lying to the east of the Andes consists of a portion of the vast Amazon rain forest south of the Guaviare River (Amazonia) and the Llanos Orientales (tropical plains) located to the north of it.

Until the twentieth century, approximately 66 percent of the population lived in the Andean core, 20 percent in the Caribbean coast, 13 percent in the Cauca Valley and the Pacific Coastal mining zone, and 1 percent in the Llanos and Amazonia. Given the lack of modern roads and an effective railroad system, the Magdalena River served as the principal conduit between the cities in the cordillera and the outside world until the completion of the Panama Canal in 1922. Thus, the Caribbean coast, although only a small part of the country's territory, has traditionally played an outsized role in the economic and political development of the country (Posada-Carbó, 1996, 12).

Since the sixteenth century this coast has been Colombia's front door to the outside world. During Spanish rule the specific gateways were the cities of Cartagena and Santa Marta, but after independence and the development of steamboats on the Magdalena, Barranquilla, the capital of the department of Atlántico and

the city closest to the Magdalena, emerged as the principal coastal port. By 1911 half of Colombia's foreign commerce passed through Barranquilla, with exports totally \$8,244,491 and imports \$9,613,355. Phanor James Eder, who visited the city in that year, noted that its population had grown to 52,000 and that the activities of its merchants, "among whom there are many foreigners, Germans predominating," had kept Barranquilla in the "vanguard of progress in Colombia." (Eder, 1911, 187). Afro-Colombians and quite a few West Indians made up the lower classes. For the most part they worked in ship repair yards, brick manufacturing, tanneries, soap, matches, candles, cotton spinning, shoe factories, ice and electric plants, and flour mills. The town had telephones, tramways, electric lighting, good shops, an excellent market, a theatre, a hospital, and "considerable social life." In Eder's opinion, its major drawbacks were the discomforting heat, unreliable water supply and a defective sewer system (Eder, 1911, 187).

Although having fallen behind Barranquilla commercially, Cartagena, the capital of Bolívar Department, continued to be a serious rival. Its population of 52,108 in 1918 was still equal to that of Barranquilla, and it had preserved its colonial Spanish character to remain a popular destination for Caribbean cruises. The Dique Canal, an artificial channel built in 1650 and repaired numerous times since, gave it a connection to the Magdalena River, but in 1911 Cartagena's exports only amounted to \$5,927,159 and imports were \$4,335,805 (Eder, 1911, 189).

In 1899 Minor Keith, the founder of the United Fruit Company (UFCO) that was already exporting bananas from Central America, sought to expand his operations in Colombia. He arrived in the department of Magdalena and bought some 12,500 acres from local owners. Fifteen years later he purchased an additional 13,000 hectares (about 31,000 acres) of *balíos* or public land located around the town of Aracataca. Keith also gained control of the Santa Marta Railroad that connected his newly acquired property with the port. The presence of this multinational enterprise, which operated its own transportation system and marketing networks, quickly transformed the town of Ciénaga in Magdalena into a flourishing economic center. The UFCO purchased a significant amount of bananas grown by local planters in addition to operating its own plantations. Production grew by leaps and bounds. In 1911 4,901,894 bunches were exported from Santa Marta in the holds of 154 UFCO steamships and 115 sailing vessels, much of the freight going to England (Rausch, 2014, 14).

As Eduardo Posada-Carbó has emphasized, throughout the twentieth century, regional cleavages and alliances limited the development of a Colombian na-

tionalism that might have united the entire country, and they also defined the history of Colombian sports (Posado-Carbó, 1966, 256-259; L'Hoeste, 2015, 86). The Caribbean as a specific region, despite playing an integral role in Colombia's international commerce, was especially segregated from the Andean core by its distinctive geography, population makeup, and political interests. Strangely enough, it was isolated from other Caribbean nations as well. In his book, *La isla encallada: El Caribe colombiano en el archipiélago del Caribe*, Alberto Abello Vives expands these points. He analyses the multiple levels of integration of the Colombian Caribbean with the rest of the "Caribbean Archipelago", and the ways it forms a specific region within the Colombian nation where leadership comes from the highland provinces. This configuration is quite different than that of the island nations of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and it goes far to explain the arrested development of professional baseball there (Abello Vives, 2015, 25-36). Venezuela's Caribbean region offers the closest comparison to Colombia, but baseball there had the support of the central government from its introduction in 1895.

## Baseball comes to Colombia

If one looks back to the 1850s when Panama was a Colombian province, there are four different accounts of the introduction of baseball to the republic. First, Ramon B. Pérez Medina in his book, *Historia del béisbol panameño* asserts that American traders and men affiliated with the Panama Railroad Company were playing baseball in the mid-1850s, and Panama's *Daily Star and Herald* on January 9, 1883 reported a game that took place in the Chiriqui Plaza on January 7. The opponents were a team from Chiriqui Province and members of the Panama Cricket and Baseball Club. The contest was won by the latter, a team made up largely of West Indian workers brought in for that period's French-managed canal construction (Pérez Medina, 1992; Thorn, 2014).

Second, Milton Jamail suggests that a Cuban, Francisco Balmaceda, established the game within Colombia proper in the mid-1870s. Balmaceda planted sugarcane on land in María la Baja, about one hundred kilometers south of Cartagena. He brought in cane cutters from Cuba and reportedly built a baseball diamond for the recreational use of his workers (Jamail, 2008, 136).

Riola García offers a third account stating that Raúl and Eduardo Enrique Segre-ra, coming from Panamá and Cuba respectively, introduced the game to Cartagena on July 20, 1897 by playing in Apolo Park near the house owned by then Presi-

dent Rafael Núñez. How long and/or often their contests took place is unclear, but the outbreak of the War of the Thousand Days in 1899 ended them, and the brothers returned to their countries of origin (Riola García, 2015, 11-12).

The fourth, and most commonly cited account, is that after the end of the Thousand Days War, three brothers—Gonzalo, Ernesto and Ibrahim Zúñiga Ángel—having completed their university studies in the US, returned to Cartagena bringing with them baseball gloves, bats and balls. On September 10, 1903 they donned their gloves and began tossing a ball around in the Plaza Santo Domingo—a spectacle that captured the attention of congregants who at that moment were leaving the nearby church. Also watching were local boys eager to join in the new game. As interest grew, the Zúñigas had to find a new space to play that was larger than the Plaza Santo Domingo, because fly balls were damaging the residences located around the plaza. After searching for another site, they finally chose the Plaza de la Carnicería, between Boquete and Tablón streets, a location occupied today by the Edificio Nacional, the Parque de las Flores and the City Bank.

At about the same time, baseball was also being played in Barranquilla. According to José Nieto Ibáñez, the García Senior brothers—Abraham and José—introduced the game in that city in 1906, but play became more organized after the arrival of the Urueta Méndez brothers, Ramón and Alberto, who, on their return from France in 1914, began practicing with Ernesto Cortíssoz, Luis Torrenegra, and Pedro Blanco. By 1916 two teams had been formed: the Atlantic Base-Ball Club and the Barranquilla Base Ball club (Nieto Ibáñez, 2010, 26-27).

Meanwhile, in Cartagena the number of players, all belonging to the elite Club de Cartagena, was growing substantially. Two teams—the Estrella Roja, managed by Enrique Grau Vélez in the barrio de Manga, and Club Unión, managed by Miguel Araujo Jiménez, were playing what was known locally as “la pelota caliente” (hot ball) (Riola García, 2015, 11-13). By end of 1913, the players founded the Liga de Béisbol de Bolívar, presided over by Enrique Grau. Included were teams from the colegios La Salle and La Esperanza, and the Cartagena and Popa clubs that were later joined by students from the Universidad de Cartagena. On November 11, 1916 the first official tournament took place in the Campo Grau. A game played between all-star teams from Barranquilla and Cartagena was won by Cartagena by a score of 6-2 (Nieto Ibáñez, 2010, 28).

Members belonging to Cartagena's elite were not the only ones to take up the sport. Many youths with no formal education began playing on beaches where they were known as "*playoneros*." The economic situation of Cartagena was far from booming, and the *playoneros* were carpenters, metal workers, welders, and boys who carried groceries for markets. Some worked for private businesses including the Terminal en Manga, and the Licorera de Bolívar: some were municipal employees building aqueducts and sewers, while others were farmers in the rural areas around the city. Many were unemployed. In their leisure time, they played baseball.

An individual's location was fundamental in his opportunity to learn the game. For example, youngsters who lived in the barrio of Torices imitated the older men they saw playing. Others in countryside around Matuna joined the people of Getsemaní who were practicing on weekends. They often wasted much time in trying to get a game organized, but even in these early days, many youths saw baseball as an avenue of opportunity. The game soon emerged as one of the cultural pillars of both Cartagena and Barranquilla. As in the neighboring Caribbean nations, the love and practice of baseball opened a way to integrate the coastal population (Riola García, 2015,22.).

In 1927 a Panamanian team, Planta Eléctrica de Colon, became the first foreign squad to visit Cartagena. Three years later the Piñeres brothers built in the Manga barrio of Barranquilla, the first enclosed stadium "Romelio Martínez" that was completed just in time for the arrival of a US team from Macon, Georgia of the South Atlantic League. The Macon players initiated the Colombian players in the most modern ways of playing baseball. Panamanian and Venezuelan teams soon followed the Americans.

During the next two decades, the level of amateur play along Colombia's north coast rapidly improved under the administration of ACOBE (Asociación de Colombiano Béisbol). By 1930 there were eighteen local teams in Cartagena alone, but enthusiasm for baseball did not extend to highland cities or to the capital, Bogotá. On May 30, 1931, the Liberal *El Gráfico* deplored the lack of *bogotano* interest in a sport that was achieving so much success in the United States and other Latin American countries. The fact that other nations were founding baseball leagues, tournaments, and associations to sponsor games and prepare young men for the sport sparked no resonance in the Colombian capital. Even in the 1940s, when products such as Camel cigarettes and US sport figures such as Joe Di Maggio

began promoting baseball games, the people in the highlands remained largely indifferent (*El Gráfico* cited b Morales Fontanilla, 2019, 3).

Given the lack of Andean interest, support for baseball came from the administrations from the coastal cities of Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta. The Baseball World Series, first held in 1938, was an international tournament in which amateur national baseball teams competed for the position of top national team in the world. The tournament generally received little publicity and did not approach the popularity of soccer's World Cup. In 1944, a Colombian team took part in the VII Amateur World Series in Caracas where it achieved a modest sixth place. The following year on December 20, 1945 during the VIII World Series held in the same city, the Colombians led by a Cuban, Pelayo Chacón, finished in second place—a performance good enough to win them the right to host the IX World Series. This success seems to have at last captured attention in the highland cities. On August 31, commentator “Popeye” in the liberal newspaper *El Espectador* wrote:

Interest in Bogotá exists, born from reasons of pure patriotism, sparked by the world championship last year, when nearly all the city waited expectantly for information transmitted by Venezuelan radio, and game after game followed with bated breath the efforts of the *costeño* players in the world championship. (*El Espectador*, 10, Aug. 31, 1946, cited by Morales Fontanilla, 2019, 60.

By December of 1946, after much discussion, the national government gave its support for the organization of the V Juegos Centroamericanos y del Caribe in Barranquilla.

## The V Central American and Caribbean World Series, December 1946

By that time, the administrators of the Amateur World Series Federation had elevated Colombia's status to world ranking, and a team largely made up of Cartagena players went on to win Colombia's first world title at the V Central American and Caribbean Games played at Romelio Martínez stadium in Barranquilla. The Central American and Caribbean Games was a multisport event held every four years after 1926 in different cities of the Region Mexico initiated the series in 1926 after its poor performance in the Olympic Games held in Paris in 1914. Seven other national teams (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Panama, Mexico, and Venezuela) took part in this competition. In the baseball

tournament, pitcher Carlos “Petaca” Rodríguez led the Colombian team that in its final game defeated Cuba, 2-0 to tie with the Dominican Republic for first place.

To break the tie and decide the championship, the umpires scheduled an extra game for December 28, but before this contest could happen, Dominican president Fulgencio Trujillo sent a message forbidding his team to play a tiebreaker because he asserted that both the Colombians and Dominicans should be declared champions. Having no choice but to obey Trujillo, the Dominicans returned to their island the following day, so that when the Colombians arrived at the stadium at 8:00 A.M. on December 28, there was no opposing team. Faced with this impasse, the three umpires declared Colombia the winner and thus the baseball champion of the Caribbean and also the world (Galvis, 1997, 63-72). Barranquilla and Cartagena fans rejoiced over this victory, acclaiming the players as heroes and providing money to improve their economic status, while in Bogotá the *costeño* colony led a boisterous celebration. Another outcome was that Cartagena received the honor to host the IX Baseball World Cup in 1947 (Riola García, 2015, 9).

### **The IX Amateur Baseball World Cup, November-December 1947**

Although Cartagena had more baseball teams than Barranquilla and was eager to host the World Cup, unlike Barranquilla it had no suitable stadium. Led by Carlos Petaca Rodríguez, the players and the city petitioned the national government to provide funds to build a stadium. When President Ospina Pérez asked during a public demonstration: “Do you want new roads or a baseball stadium?”, the overwhelming response was to demand a stadium (Galvis, 1997, 73).

On May 10, 1947 the national government ordered the construction of a modern baseball stadium in Cartagena. The main design challenge was to provide a roof for the stands without intermediate supports in order to allow the audience unobstructed visibility. To accomplish this goal, designer Guillermo González Zuleta devised a three-dimensional layout with curved elements to form a strikingly appealing building. González Zuleta’s designs for large facilities were particularly innovative. Three examples of his buildings in Bogotá are the Gimnasio Moderno Church (1953), the Rayo Market Hall (1954), and the Jockey Club (1954). The resulting stadium, which was entirely built by Colombian professionals, included stands along the three sides of the baseball diamond, with the central part covered by roofing using 16.59 m long cantilevers (bridge-like beams) to support 5cm

thick vaulted shells. Twelve concrete frames supported the vaults. The stadium took six months to construct and cost \$850,000. Baptized “Once de Noviembre,” it had a capacity for 15,000 spectators: 6,000 accommodated in central stands shaded by the ceiling; 6,000 in sun, and 3,000 on the popular platform. The finished structure received international recognition for its effective response to mechanical and spatial criteria and adaptation to the local climate and resources (Galindo Díaz and Varas Caicedo, 1947, 665).

In November 1947 teams from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Venezuela arrived several days before the start of the tournament to join the Colombians in Cartagena, where an avalanche of tourists and *cartageneros* greeted them in the streets demanding their autographs. Flags flown from the houses and balconies contributed to the prevailing sport carnival atmosphere. The US, Dominican Republic, England, and Cuba declined to attend—the US because the series was “amateur,” and the Cubans because they did not want to face the pitching of Carlos Petaca Rodríguez (Galvis, 1997,74).

Colombia played its first game on December 29, 1947 against Mexico and won 4-3. On December 2 it defeated Costa Rica 9-2, but the team subsequently lost to Venezuela on December 4, one of the favorites for the title, by a score of 4-1. During the following two games Colombia recovered and walloped El Salvador 13-0 and Guatemala 8-0, but Nicaragua’s loss to Puerto Rico in a game ending 6-1, created a three-way tie between Colombia, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico. During an added playoff series beginning on December 19, the Puerto Ricans defeated Nicaragua 6-1. The next day Colombia again faced Puerto Rico to battle for the title. Colombia won 5-0 with the Carlos Petaca Rodríguez as the winning pitcher, thus securing its second world title in amateur baseball. Although Colombia continued to compete in successive World Cup Series, it did not win again until 1965 when it defeated Mexico in the XVI World Cup. (Galvis, 1997, 76; Forero, 1989,384).

## Professional Baseball—The First Era

By 1947 US Organized Baseball was steadily expanding into the Caribbean. Cuba led off in that year by establishing a professional Winter League. In 1948 Panama, Puerto Rico and Venezuela also organized professional leagues, and in 1955 Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua began their professional leagues. By that year US Organized Baseball had recognized these Latino leagues which had changed their schedules to play during the winter months to avoid conflicts with

the US spring and summer baseball seasons. These Winter Leagues generally operated at a Triple-A level of play. They offered the highest-profile baseball outside the US, and although their teams were typically made up of professional players from their respective countries, they also attracted prominent US major leaguers seeking to play during the off season (Minasian, 2018).

Colombia's effort to join its peers was blocked by ACOBE which steadfastly refused to allow professional players on the teams it oversaw. A growing demand especially in Barranquilla to compete on the professional level challenged ACOBE's power, and on January 24, 1948, the Liga de Béisbol del Atlántico organized by Nick Rosanía, withdrew its affiliation with that entity. In the same month the Estrellas de Panama, a professional team arrived in Barranquilla to play a friendly game with that city's amateur team, Filtta owned by the Filtta Sikl company. Filtta's victory over the Panamanians seemed to provide evidence that Colombia was truly ready to begin professional play, and sportswriter Don Chelo de Castro argued in *La Prensa* that it was obligatory to move the sport forward. He believed that the new Liga de Béisbol del Atlántico could lead the way (Ibáñez, 2010, 138).

In March 1948 the Liga de Béisbol del Atlántico was reorganized as the Liga del Béisbol Organizado with full independence to contract players of international quality. Accordingly, the Barranquilla Filttas planned a mini-series with three professional teams—the Habana Cubans, Chesterfield of Panama, and Cervecería Caracas. This proposal required an enormous financial commitment on the part of the new league managers since the series would cost \$108,000 pesos, a very large sum at this time. When the Venezuelan team failed to arrive, its slot was taken by a team made up of Cartageneros. In the end, the games in the series took place in a haphazard fashion; there was no clear winner, and the series failed to attract enough fans to make it profitable. Nevertheless, this somewhat disappointing outcome failed to dampen the conviction of Barranquilla and Cartagena enthusiasts that it was truly time to embrace professional play (Ibáñez, 2010, 1490).

In the weeks that followed the organization of the Liga de Béisbol Organizado was reconfigured as a contest between the two cities. It consisted of four teams: the Torices and Indios representing Cartagena and Armco (originally known as Tomas Arrieta and owned by the Armco Iron Works) and Filtta (also called the Tejedores) for Barranquilla. It was decided that each team would deposit 1000 pesos with the high commission to pay for sanctions. Fourteen to sixteen players would make up each team, and none of the players might earn more than 3,000

pesos (Porto Cabrales, 2013, 272). Since the Once de Noviembre arena had not been completed, the games were played in Barranquilla. Sportswriter Justiniano Martínez invented a nickname for each team: The Filta became the “Tejedores;” Armco became the “Varilleros”; the Torices became the “Tigres” and the Piel Rojo team was renamed “Indios” since they wore the Piel Rojo cigarette logo on their uniform shirts.

On April 9, 1948, the planning of the schedule came to an abrupt halt on receiving the alarming news of the assassination of popular Liberal leader, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogotá. In the capital, Gaitán’s death ignited a devastating three-day uprising known as the Bogotazo. His murder inflamed long simmering hatreds between the Liberal and Conservative partisans. A new era of violence spread rapidly throughout the highland provinces, but strangely enough, left the coastal regions largely untouched. By government decree Barranquilla’s two newspapers-- the Conservative *La Prensa* and the Liberal *El Herald*—were shut down through the month of April, but on May 8, *El Herald* resumed publication with an issue dedicated to the career and death of Gaitán.

Surrounded by an atmosphere of overwhelming national sadness, The Liga Colombiana de Beisbol Organizado (LCBO) organized the first championship of professional baseball. On June 6 dark clouds covered the skies in Barranquilla as Armco and the Indians played the inaugural game held in the Tomás Arrieta Stadium. Both teams included the cream of creole players supplemented by a maximum of six professional players from Panama and the Dominican Republic. The League’s leaders invited President Ospina Pérez to attend on the opening day, but the need to control the growing violence in the highlands forced him to decline. The governors of Bolívar and Atlántico did attend, and Barranquilla fans filled the Tomás Arrieta stadium in spite of the fact that it lacked a roof to shield them from the sun. In this first game the Indians beat Armco 2-1. Succeeding games took place on subsequent weekend days as the stadium lacked the artificial light necessary for evening play.

The first season consisted of 18 games scheduled between June 6 and October 12, 1948. There was no playoff, and the Indios were declared the winners on the basis of having achieved the best record of 11 wins and 7 losses. On October 16, Colombians won the All Star game playing against a team made up of foreigners by a score of 5-0 (Nieto Ibáñez, 2010, 273).

The Liga Colombiana de Béisbol Organizado played eight more seasons until 1959 when the high cost of continuing forced it to suspend operations. Although between 1955-1957 the US established ties with LCBO teams for three winter seasons, Colombian play never achieved the status of the other Winter League countries (Hernández, 2011, 2). For example, during the 1955-56 season, participants on the teams included 177 North Americans, 62 Cubans, 29 Dominicans, 29 Panamanians, 25 Puerto Ricans, 21 Venezuelans, five Nicaraguans, but only 96 Colombians.<sup>1</sup> Although thirty-nine Colombians from this era of pro-ball went on to play in the major leagues including Willie McCovey and Brooks Robinson, professional play within the country was not attempted again until 1979 (Porto Cabrales, 2002, 36).

## Colombian Baseball's Decline in the last half of the twentieth century

Why by 1958 did Colombia fail to establish an on-going Winter League like those that existed in other Caribbean countries? There are at least four possible explanations: First, the influence of dictators in three Caribbean nations who zealously supported baseball; the political turmoil caused by the civil war known as a *Violencia*; Second, political turmoil in Colombia caused by the *Violencia* civil war; Third, the development of *ciclismo* and *fútbol* in the highland region of the country, and finally, the disconnect of the Caribbean region—the home of baseball—from the rest of Colombia, a situation which Alberto Abello Vives has defined as an “*isla encallada*” (stranded island).

## The influence of Caribbean dictators

In the aftermath of the Cuban-Spanish-American War, US-backed dictators controlled several of the Caribbean nations. These leaders understood that identification with sports was an essential way to gain popular support and enhance their image at home and abroad. Juan Vicente Gómez, while ruling Venezuela from 1908-1935) got an early start. He developed baseball in Caracas and pitched for a team that included several of his relatives as well as members of his administration (McNeil, 2012, 158). Anastasio Somoza, who controlled Nicaragua between 1936-1956, was no less an enthusiast. Declaring baseball the national sport, he ensured that the standard of play continued to improve during his regime (Olek-

<sup>1</sup> Raul Port Cabrales, *Historia de béisbol profesional de Colombia*. (Cartagena: Gráficas el Cheque, 2002), 36

sak, 1991, 193). The best example is Rafael Trujillo, who dominated the Dominican Republic with an iron hand between 1930-1961. Trujillo styled himself as the “Maximum Protector of National Sport.” An ardent baseball fan, he successfully coopted baseball into the narrative of Dominican progress (Yoder, 2014). By contrast, Colombia’s only twentieth century dictator, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who ruled from 1953-1957, was not born in the Caribbean but in the Andean city Tunja. While Rojas understood the importance of embracing popular sport and adopted policies supporting ciclismo and fútbol, he showed no interest in the development of baseball (Rausch, 1919).

## Political turmoil

There is general agreement among scholars that the era of La Violencia—the undeclared civil war that lasted from 1946 to 1964—was a major turning point in Colombian history. The long-standing bitter struggle between the Liberal and Conservative parties finally exploded with the assassination Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogotá on April 9, 1948. The death of the populist Liberal leader precipitated unprecedented mob violence in the capital (known as the Bogotazo) and in other cities throughout the country. Tension heightened when President Ospina Pérez closed congress on November 9, 1949 and declared a state of siege that was followed in 1950 by the election of Conservative Laureano Gómez in a contest boycotted by the Liberals.

Under Gómez the national economy steadily improved, but wages lagged behind prices; the government forcibly broke up strikes, and for laborers it was the worst of times. In rural areas the Violencia expanded into new regions gaining in intensity until all of Colombia except the Caribbean area was affected. The fighting increasingly assumed the nature of a class struggle as peasants resisted the efforts of landowners to eject them from their parcels, and Communist Party activists began organizing strongholds of self-defense among uprooted peasants. The inability of Gómez and vice-president Roberto Urdaneta to restore peace led to General Rojas Pinilla’s seizure of the government on June 13, 1953 in an unprecedented military coup.

For two years, Rojas was able to tamp down the violence by proclaiming an unconditional amnesty to all the fighters who would return to civilian life. Several thousand accepted this peace initiative, but many refused to give up, and sporadic resistance continued throughout the 1960s. This failure to eliminate the violence completely contributed to Rojas’ overthrow in May 1957, when the

leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties agreed to share power peacefully in an arrangement that came to be known as the National Front (Rausch, 2007, 117-119).

## Development of Ciclismo and Fútbol

Given the problems caused by uncontrolled civil warfare, the national government made no effort to promote baseball as a professional sport. Instead, as David Leonardo Quitán Roldán has pointed out, it was during the early years of La Violencia that two other sports — the cycling road race (Vuelta a Colombia) and professional fútbol (soccer)— would come to dominate Colombia spectator sports (Quitán Roldán, 2013, 33-35). Liberal and Conservative leaders as well as General Rojas Pinilla believed that these sports could be seen as a popular expression of democracy and proof that Colombians could do things together. Rojas actively intervened in cycling and football by hiring coaches for the teams, by organizing the National School of Physical Education, and by the creation of contests such as the Workers Athletic Tournament (Morales Fontanilla, 2018, 15).

At first glance, cycling would seem an incongruous sport to be embraced by Colombians given the absence of roads within the formidable elevations of the Andean cordillera that dominated the core of the country, yet after the introduction of the bicycle in the 1890s, Colombian men quickly embraced the vehicle not only as a mode of transportation but also as a sport. Inspired by reports of the Tour de France, the world's first national road race begun in 1903, Colombians in 1951 organized their own race known as the Vuelta a Colombia in 1951. The first race, which covered 1,254 formidable kilometers along paths of sand, mud, and stone through the Departments of Cundinamarca, Tolima, Viejo Caldas and Valle del Cauca, was an enormous success. For fifteen days the “country was paralyzed listening to the details of the race recounted with great emotion by Carlos Arturo Rueda C. over the Nueva Granada radio network.” (Forero Nogués, 1989, 372). On his arrival in Bogotá, Efraín Forero emerged as the winner, completing the race with a time of 45 hours 23 minutes and 8 seconds.

The Vuelta a Colombia has been held annually up to the present. While immensely popular among the highland population, the sport's attraction did not immediately extend to the lowland regions of the nation. Instead, professional soccer that developed about the same time emerged by the 1980s as the sport that would bring together Colombians from many provinces, ethnicities and even

social classes. By the 1980s the Colombian futbol league was thriving and recruiting players from all regions of the country. As Fernández L’Hoeste points out,

Soccer emerged as the ideal tool to forge loyalty to the national government and foster pride in the positive achievements of the community—in many occasions, poverty-stricken townships almost entirely forsaken by the central government, as the case of the slums in Cali or Medellín. (Fernández L’Hoeste, 2015, 98)

Thanks to the support of the drug cartels that spared no expense to bring Colombian players up to world-class standards, four main teams—Atlético Nacional, Deportivo Independiente Medellín, Millonarios, and América—made great strides in national and international soccer tournaments. In 1994 FIFA (Federación Internationale de Fútbol) ranked the Colombian national soccer team as fourth in the world. By the late 1990s the national government as well as the private sector recognized that it was soccer that was bringing together players from all corners of the country. Fernández L’Hoesta adds: “The Colombian flag has never been as popular as when the national soccer team embraced it, and this has benefitted both the government and private interests”(2015, 100-101.) As in the other South American countries (as opposed to the Caribbean nations), soccer would become the unifying sport of Colombian nationalism.

## The Caribbean Region Disconnect

A fourth explanation for the delay of Colombian baseball to thrive until the late twentieth century lies in the Caribbean coast’s atypical position with regard to other Caribbean countries and other regions of Colombia. Despite the fact that Colombia’s Caribbean coast is greater than those of Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Panama, histories of the Caribbean beginning with Germán Arciniegas, *Biografía del Caribe* in 1945 did not recognize Colombia as belonging to the region. Juan Bosch in *De Cristobal Colón a Fidel Castro: El Caribe, frontera imperial* (2012) rectified this omission to some extent by mentioning Panama as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Colombian province, but it was not until Caribbean native Gabriel García Márquez received the Nobel Prize in 1982, “that the world recognized that Colombia was not only Andean but also Caribbean—a country governed from an altiplano in the Andes but that had an enormous territory: a region called “Atlantic coast,” with characteristics that differed from the idea of the Colombia that had emerged in the process of construction of nationality”(Abello Vives, 2015, 34).

Since the 1980s there had been a surge of investigations concerning the Colombian Caribbean so that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has become the most studied region of the republic. Yet despite this burst of interest, Abello Vives argues that “the Colombian Caribbean is a kind of ‘isla encallada,’ a region that doesn’t awake, trapped by privation of needs and basic capacities; an island that does not stand out from the rest of Colombian territory; an island in which the bridges that would unite it with the rest of the Caribbean and with the rest of Colombia are broken”. (43-46)

Unlike other Caribbean nations, Colombia is not a country “totally” Caribbean, and its Caribbean region is just one among several dominated by the highland departments. Moreover, its Caribbean simply does not fit the stereotype of an exotic territory of tropical sun and beaches. Sugar plantations do not dominate its economy, although the introduction of banana production has created large landholdings. The population is largely indigenous and afro-Colombians who account for 43% and 32% respectively of the of the total of these groups nationwide, and who live amidst very high conditions of poverty, illiteracy and lack of public services (Abello Vives: 2015, 52). Due to drug trafficking, in recent decades, the region has become a territory disputed by guerrillas and paramilitaries. Given the Caribbean’s disconnect from the rest of Colombia, it is not surprising that baseball—born, nurtured, and supported by the citizens of Barranquilla and Cartagena—has long failed to win significant support from the national government or from the inhabitants of other sections of the country.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the absence of a dictator who deliberately encouraged baseball development, the emergence of political violence in mid-twentieth century Colombia, the development of ciclismo and football—sports that captured the attention of many regions—and the disconnect between the Caribbean coast and the rest of the country have all have contributed to the failure of the country to become a powerhouse in Latin American baseball. Nevertheless, costeños have never lost their passion for the game. In 1993 the Colombian Professional Baseball League (PBL) was reborn, but it was not until 1997 when Barranquilla shortstop, Edgar “El Niño” Rentería enabled the Florida Marlins to win the World Series by launching the winning single, that a baseball player become a national hero with the status of ciclista Lucho Herrera or bullfighter César Rincón. In 1997 Colombian president Ernesto Samper presented Rentería with Colombia’s highest honor,

the “San Carlos cross of the Order of the great Knight.” Before he retired in 2013, Rentería amassed a brilliant career having been named All-Star in five years and twice winning the Gold Glove Award. In June 2008 he singled to complete his two thousandth career hit. . By early 21<sup>st</sup> century the PBL, known officially as the Colombian Winter League, had increased to six teams, and in 2010-2011 it was enlarged by the inclusion of two highland teams, the Potros of Medellín and the Águilas of Bogotá. As La Rosa and Mejía have noted, baseball is still not a “national sport to the degree that soccer and cycling are, but many Colombians follow the US pastime, particularly rooting for the Major League teams that included the *costeños*” (La Rosa and Mejía, 2012, 186.)

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