

Milton H. Jamail. *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball.* Foreword by Larry Dierker. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. xvii + 182 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8093-2310-4.



Reviewed by Jeff Powers-Beck

Published on H-Arete (June, 2000)

In recent years, Cuban baseball, as a matter of both sports and politics, has become very hot property--*bastante caliente*, like a fuming Cuban cigar or a sizzling Livan Hernandez fastball. Last year and this have seen the publication of a significant new corpus of Cuban baseball history, fiction, and lore. These works include Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria's passionate tribute, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball*, Peter Bjarkman's glossy photo-history, *Smoke: The Romance and Lore of Cuban Baseball*, Tim Wendell's novel of intrigue, *Castro's Curveball*, and Darryl Brock's historical fiction, *Havana Heat*.

Amid these reflections on Cuba's anguished national love affair with baseball, two works speak definitively about the present conditions and future possibilities for baseball on the island--*Pitching Around Fidel* by Sports Illustrated's S.L. Price, and *Full Count* by Milton H. Jamail of the University of Texas at Austin. Whereas Price's thicker work considers baseball as one of many cogs (with boxing, track, volleyball, etc.) in Fidel Castro's nationalized sports machine, Jamail's *Full Count* focuses on baseball alone, as a symptom

and metaphor for life in Cuba under Castro. "Bronca," the Cuban slang term for a baseball brawl, is also "coincidentally, the same word the Cubans use to describe the bizarre relations they've had with the U.S. government over the past forty years," writes Jamail, and "Baseball also has become *parte de la bronca*."

The ten short chapters of Jamail's *Full Count* detail unpretentiously and pointedly the political crisis that is Cuban baseball: from the development of baseball on the island as a gesture of independence from Spain, to the U.S. embargo against Cuba, to the growth of the state's impressive scouting and development apparatus for baseball, to Fidel Castro's defiant acclamations about the victories of "free baseball" in Cuba over "slave baseball" in the U.S. While Jamail almost never uses the distant and detached tone of a historian, *Full Count* introduces well the fundamental struggles facing the Cuban people, and Cuban baseball players in particular. Jamail does so by candidly telling of his visits to Cuba, and reporting his interviews with Cuban ministers, intellectuals, and longtime players and fans. Here we lis-

ten to the nostalgic voices of professional Cuban baseball in the Bautista era, like Gilberto Dihigo, son of the legendary Cuban player Martin Dihigo, and Ernesto Morillo, a pitcher who played minor league baseball in the U.S. in the 1940s and 1950s and once struck out Stan Musial in an exhibition game. And we hear Marcelo Sanchez, a member of Pena Deportiva, the Cuban equivalent of the Society for American Baseball Research, discussing baseball ardently but courteously with his Pena colleagues.

Although Jamail clearly loves the game of baseball, and has a brief word with legendary Cuban third baseman Omar Linares, player profiles and game descriptions make up a very small part of this book. Rather, the central narrative of *Full Count* tells of the Cuban economy--which has become badly polarized between the poverty wages of nationalized industries and the decent wages of private, tourist enterprises--and its intersections with Cuban baseball politics. Jamail tells the story through descriptions of Cuban life on the streetcorner and park, where the gatherings of the *esquina caliente* talk baseball, and the small, unpainted apartments, where ordinary Cubans dream of better lives. In order to illustrate the "dollarization" of the Cuban economy, for example, Jamail repeats a popular joke in Havana: "A man [was] going up to a bar and announcing that he was buying drinks for everyone. His wife rushes in and tells the bartender to stop. Her husband had a delusion that he was a taxi driver, she explained, when in reality he was only a neurosurgeon." Here, as throughout the book, the author sees Cuban baseball so tightly interwoven with Cuban politics and economics, that it is much, much more than an athletic contest between the first-base and third-base lines.

The stories of the defectors, both the major and minor league players, loom large in *Full Count*: Rene Arocha, Rolando Arrojo, Livan Hernandez, Orlando Hernandez, Rey Ordonez, et al., all evidence the wealth of untapped baseball tal-

ent on the island, which stagnates at its highest level, with only Equipo Cuba competitions to occupy it. While Jamail did manage one unrevealing interview with Livan Hernandez, we learn more about Cuban players from his interviews with minor league pitcher Larry Rodriguez in Great Falls, Montana, and Rodriguez's family in the Cuban city of Artemisa. "I would really like to go visit Larry for two or three months, and then come back to Cuba," says Rodriguez's grandfather, "I just don't want to go on a raft." The family now has a refrigerator and new furniture, thanks to Rodriguez's contract with the Arizona Diamondbacks, and he has a winter home in Venezuela, but a painful separation comes with the signing bonus. Rodriguez sums up, "It means leaving all of that behind--your friends, your childhood, aunts, uncles, brothers, everything--to come here, by yourself, and to struggle in a different world . . ."

If the pitching of "El Duque" and the fielding of Rey Ordonez were not enough, *Full Count* shows that a small part of the burgeoning baseball talent in Cuba will make the poignant decision to defect and will enjoy success in the major leagues. The inevitable prospect, which even Castro is aware of, is that Cuban baseball will one day be liberated from its "libertad," and then will invigorate U.S. baseball with its talent and passion for the game. Havana then may have its own major league franchise, and Cuban players will populate the major leagues heavily. But the inevitable, as Jamail points out, still beckons from a painful distance.

This morning, June 5, just before writing the review, I stumbled upon an AP story in *USA Today* entitled, "Another Cuban reportedly defects." The story reported that Andy Morales, a 24-year-old third baseman, had apparently left Cuba on a boat that ran out of fuel near Key West. He and thirty other defectors were picked up by a Coast Guard cutter, and their immigration status remains as yet uncertain. About 35 Cuban baseball players have defected within the last decade, and each

one represents thousands of players still on the island. Baseball is, indeed, part of the *bronca* between the U.S. and Cuba.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://www.h-net.org/~arete>

Citation: Jeff Powers-Beck. Review of Jamail, Milton H. *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball*. H-Arete, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4294>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.