

Half a Century Later, Much Intrigue and Lore Surrounds the International League's 7-Year Foray into Cuba

Baseball's history in Cuba dates back nearly as far as it does in the United States, and its origins are equally as clouded. Nemisio Guillo is credited with introducing the sport to the island in the 1860's after attending school in Alabama. Guillo and his brother Ernesto formed Cuba's first team in 1868 (the Habana Baseball Club), and the nation immediately developed a passion for the sport.

The first professional league took root in 1870, and soon scores of amateur clubs appeared alongside the thriving pro circuit. During the 20th century, countless Major League and Negro League players frequently barnstormed in Cuba, setting the stage for the island's entry into the world of Minor League Baseball by the 1940's.

The natural site was Cuba's capital city Havana, the center of industrial and economic activity in the nation. A string of luxury hotels, casinos, and nightclubs gave the city a status among tourists which strongly rivaled Miami.

Thus, Cuba's first affiliation with Minor League Baseball began in the late 1940's with a Class-C club in the Florida International League. Playing in a spacious structure known as Gran Stadium de La Habana (Great Stadium of Havana) or Estadio do Cerro (Stadium of the Hill), which held 35,000, the Havana Cubans annually led the League in attendance while winning four pennants and two playoff titles.

The success achieved in the FIL, coinciding with the League's pending demise, convinced Cubans owner Bobby Maduro that Havana could successfully operate a franchise at the Triple-A level. Maduro approached the International



The 1954 Sugar Kings included two future big leaguers in pitcher Julio Moreno (second from left) and infielder Juan Delis (second from right).

League, promising to purge gambling at Gran Stadium and to reimburse IL clubs \$60,000 each to offset travel costs to Havana. IL owners agreed, and in 1954 Havana replaced the Springfield franchise, which had suffered three consecutive last-place finishes and had attracted only 85,000 fans in 1953. The IL schedule would bring each club to Havana for a 5-game series.

The Triple-A Havana Sugar Kings, often referred to locally as the Cuban Sugar Kings or the Havana Cubans, sparked a dream in the island nation that a Major League franchise was now only a step away. While Havana was historically a great baseball city, the Sugar Kings proved only a moderate success, peaking with an average attendance of 4,067 in its second season but plummeting to less than 1,100 by 1957.

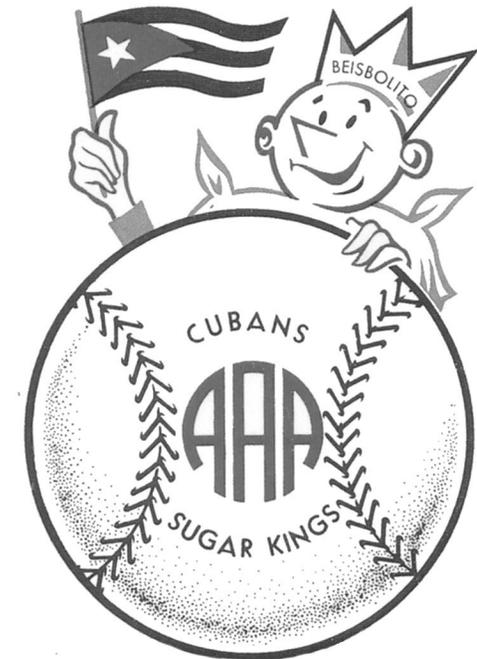
On the field, the Sugar Kings toiled in mediocrity during the franchise's early years in the IL. An affiliate of the Cincinnati Reds, the club boasted local fixtures (and future Major Leaguers) such as Orlando Pena, Mike Cuellar, Leo Cardenas, Juan Delis, Fermin Guerra, Ray Noble, Carlos Paula, and Cookie Rojas, plus notable imports such as Owen Friend, Lou Skizas, Brooks Lawrence, Jim Pendleton, Luis Arroyo, and Pompeyo Davalillo. Some of Cuba's biggest baseball legends of the era who suited up for the Sugar Kings were past their prime but still served as effective draws at the gate, such as Pedro Formental and Conrado Marrero, the latter of whom was five years older than the club's manager at the time, Reggie Otero.

Otero was himself a local legend, having played an extensive career in the Minor Leagues (including a brief stint with Albany of the IL). Otero managed the Sugar Kings during the first two-and-a-half seasons in Havana, a stretch which included the franchise's first trip to the Governors' Cup playoffs in 1955. That year the 3rd-place Sugar Kings met 2nd-place Toronto in the first round of the League's postseason, but fell in the series 4 games to 1.

Another shift in IL geography occurred following the 1955 campaign, as the Syracuse club was sold to owners who moved the franchise south to Miami. The Marlins became a convenient rival for the Sugar Kings for the rest of the decade.

Over the next three seasons, the Havana club struggled to a record of 215-247 and failed to make the playoffs. Then came the politically tense summer of 1959, during which the Sugar Kings enjoyed their greatest success on the diamond.

Following Fidel Castro's revolution and ousting of President Fulgencio Batista, much speculation existed about the future of professional baseball in Havana under the new



regime. Against this backdrop, the Sugar Kings (guided by new skipper Preston Gomez) played to a 3rd place finish, making the playoffs for just the second time in club history. The 1959 Sugar Kings featured Mike Cuellar and Raul Sanchez on the hill, Elio Chacon and Cookie Rojas in the infield, and outfielders Tony Gonzalez and Carlos Paula, all future Major Leaguers. Still, Havana finished 9.0 games off the pace set by the Pennant-winning Buffalo Bisons, who ironically featured Cuban native Frank "Pancho" Herrera as the League's MVP and Triple Crown winner.

After rising to power, Castro had a special box constructed for himself at Gran Stadium just behind the home team's first base dugout, and his soldiers were often seen patrolling the grounds armed with sub-machine guns. Stories of interference and intimidation spread like wildfire in the U.S. press and continue to be part of the mythology surrounding the Havana franchise. Decades later, the line between truth and exaggeration remains blurred.

One of the most legendary accounts occurred against Rochester on July 25, 1959. The game, which began at the usual start time of 9 p.m., extended long into the evening. At midnight, a Cuban military and civilian celebration exploded into lights, flags, music, and gunfire both inside and outside of the park. The scene intensified when, after both teams scored

INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE IN CUBA: 50 YEARS LATER



once in the 11th, Rochester manager Cot Deal was ejected and handed over his duties to player-coach Frank Verdi. One batter into the 12th, more shots rang out, this time grazing both Verdi (in the third base coaching box) and Sugar Kings shortstop Leo Cardenas. Players, coaches, and umpires alike dashed from the field, calling the game. Rochester refused to play the series finale, boarding a plane that night for the U.S.

IL President Frank Shaughnessy exerted his authority to keep the schedule intact. When the 1959 regular season came to a close, the Sugar Kings launched a surprising postseason run that stoked island enthusiasm and provided locals a much-needed distraction from the political turmoil.

In the first round, Havana shocked 2nd place Columbus by sweeping the Jets in four straight games. In the finals for the first time, the Sugar Kings met the Richmond Virginians, who touted IL Most Valuable Pitcher Bill Short. Havana would prevail in six games to gain their first (and only) International League title. Gomez, a Cuban-native, would be the only manager in League history born outside the United States to win a Governors' Cup championship until Puerto Rican Charlie Montoyo of Durham did so in 2009.

The Sugar Kings advanced to what was then the premiere event in Minor League Baseball - the Junior World Series. Their opponent was the American Association champion Minneapolis Millers, managed by Gene Mauch and led by future Hall of Famer Carl Yastrzemski.

Barely 1,000 fans turned out under frigid conditions for the first two games in Minnesota, prompting officials to agree to shift the remainder of the series to Havana. 90-degree temperatures led to more than 100,000 Cubans packing Gran Stadium for the final five games of the series, resulting in the event's all-time attendance record. The number included as many as 3,000 infantry troops, on hand to keep order in the tense Cuban capital.

The Sugar Kings took Games 3 and 4 in extra innings, putting them ahead 3-1 in the series and one win from the Junior World Series championship. Minneapolis then rallied to take the next two contests, setting up an exciting, winner-take-all seventh game which went down to the wire.

In the decider, the Millers nursed a 2-0 lead into the 8th inning before Havana evened the score. Then in the bottom of the 9th, a clutch single by Daniel Morejon brought home Raul Sanchez with the winning run, giving the Sugar Kings a dramatic victory.

The 1959 Junior World Series championship proved to be the swan song for professional baseball on the island of Cuba. As Castro's communist-leaning government tightened its grip on the nation, the 1960 season unfolded amidst more stories of bizarre incidents on the playing field. In one such occurrence, a Cuban national on the Sugar Kings (who had been inducted into the army), was being pounded by the visiting club. When Castro's patience wore thin, he shouted for a time out and stormed out to the pitcher's mound where he berated and slapped the player.

In June of 1960, Castro nationalized roughly \$850 million worth of U.S. property and businesses, including oil refineries, utilities, ranches, sugar mills, and banks. The move would soon lead to America's embargo of Cuba. The last IL team to visit Havana turned out to be Buffalo. Bisons players reported seeing clouds of black smoke billowing from American-owned oil tanks upon their departure from Cuba.

Finally on July 13, 1960, while the Sugar Kings were in the midst of a road trip, the International League officially relocated the Havana franchise to Jersey City. Frank Shaughnessy, in his final season of a 24-year tenure as IL President, coordinated efforts with Baseball Commissioner Ford Frick and U.S. Secretary of State Christian Herter to remove Minor League Baseball from Havana, citing fears



Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro celebrates Havana's win in the 1959 Junior World Series with the team's hero, Daniel Morejon (center). Sugar Kings Manager Preston Gomez is standing immediately behind Morejon.

that the playing field was no longer a safe venue. Many of the specific details surrounding the dismantling of Bobby Maduro's franchise remain clouded in confusion.

When the Sugar Kings officially became the Jersey City Giants on July 13, a number of Cubans on the club (including Sanchez, Cuellar, and Cardenas) opted to remain in the States and pursue their promising careers. Manager Tony Castano, along with coach Reinaldo Cordeiro, immediately resigned and returned to their homeland.

The 1960 club, which finished the season in Jersey City, fell 2.0 games shy of a playoff berth. Jersey City drew fewer than 62,000 fans in 1961, and the following year the franchise was moved to Atlanta.

HAVANA SUGAR KINGS RECORD IN THE INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE (1954-1960)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Record</u>	<u>Finish</u>	<u>Attendance</u>	<u>Manager</u>	<u>Governors' Cup Playoffs</u>
1954	78-77 (.503)	5th place	295,453	Reggie Otero	Did Not Qualify
1955	87-66 (.569)	3rd place	313,232	Reggie Otero	Lost to Toronto 4-1
1956	72-82 (.468)	6th place	220,357	Reggie Otero / Napoleon Reyes	Did Not Qualify
1957	78-77 (.503)	6th place	84,320	Napoleon Reyes	Did Not Qualify
1958	65-88 (.425)	8th place	178,340	Napoleon Reyes / Tony Pacheco	Did Not Qualify
1959	80-73 (.523)	3rd place	200,094	Preston Gomez	Won Governors' Cup (def. Columbus 4-0, def. Richmond 4-2)
1960*	76-77 (.497)	5th place	121,755	Tony Castano / Napoleon Reyes	Did Not Qualify

* Franchise moved to Jersey City on July 13, 1960 (Reyes became manager upon relocation). Record reflects entire season.