



## ***Caliendo embarks on his own journey of baseball diplomacy to Cuba***

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**In 2007, while attending Olympics trials, Pete Caliendo (left) checked out Havana's historic streets. He also met a top Cuban player (center) and a baseball federation official (right).**

Pete Caliendo is looking for a few more good (young) men to help make history.

The longtime veteran Chicago-area amateur coach will be out of the limelight. He'll be a long distance in profile and hype from what some called the "surreal" images of the American and Cuban presidents meeting one another at a Havana ballpark with Rachel Robinson, baseball's First Lady, squarely in that mix. Meanwhile, Tampa Bay Rays players were being mobbed as heroes on the streets of Cuba's capital.

But actions at Caliendo's level and that of his Cuban coaching counterparts will be the real grassroots progress of mending the 56-years-long fractured U.S.-Cuba discourse.

Caliendo, formerly president of the Pitch and Hit Club, is looking to add six more players to the dozen already named to his team of 15- to 19-year-olds – high school juniors and seniors, and college freshmen and sophomores.

The barnstorming bunch he'll take to Cuba will play their age cohorts in a six-day tour in late July. You'll qualify if you've got talent on the field and in the classroom, and have the basic good character that would attract scouts from high-minded pro organizations.

After making some 20 trips with his amateurs to the Dominican Republic and several more to Puerto Rico, and literally circling the globe on behalf of his beloved game, Caliendo's second-ever trip to Cuba may be the most memorable of his life. He attended the Olympic trials in 2007, but now will actively build bridges through his own team.

"I go back with the Cuban Baseball Federation for many years," said Caliendo, a 33-year coaching veteran dating back to his teen-age years. "I was the technical commissioner with the International Baseball Federation, which is now the World Baseball and Softball Confederation. I worked with many of the officials in Cuba, and became friends with them. I got their approval to come.

"I've been talking with the Cubans for awhile, in other countries. I've seen them in Japan and Taiwan. I'd make some calls [to Cuba]. Some people I can get e-mails to. Some bounce back, some go through. They know me personally. It's not completely open, 100 percent. It's not like they said to bring all the teams you can. They have to trust people."

### **Coach wired into the right people**

Caliendo has all the right connections. He knows Higinio Velez, president of the Cuban Baseball Federation, who was interviewed by Pedro Gomez on the ESPN telecast of the Rays-Cuban National Team game attended by Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro. Another longtime relationship is with Tony Castro, Fidel Castro's youngest son and vice president of the baseball federation. The younger Castro is a big advocate of building bridges through baseball. He is a crucial connection in booking U.S.-Cuban games.

"We communicate by Facebook and e-mails," Caliendo said of Castro.

Although above-board migration of Cuban talent to the majors seems a certainty in upcoming years, Cuban officials apparently still are skittish about visiting Americans jumping the gun to snare players. They still have to vet the likes of Caliendo, who wants no more to play baseball, see the sights and have players on both sides learn more about each other.

"In the Dominican, you do whatever you like, start academies, own players, sell them to major-league teams," Caliendo said. "In Cuba, [the talent peddling] will be run by the government, similar to Japan where they post players. They're concerned if you're affiliated with a big-league team."

Caliendo can be contacted at [PeterCaliendo@icloud.com](mailto:PeterCaliendo@icloud.com) or at PO Box 68103 in Schaumburg, IL 60169. Prospective players have until the end of April to make a commitment.

"We'll get recommendation from coaches," Caliendo said of prospective players. "We'll do a follow-up to make sure the player is a good player. They've got to be quality kids student-wise. Their background is important. How do they train? It's the image of the U.S. on these kids. We don't want kids who are swearing or throwing bats."

Cost of the trip is \$2,850 per person. If two or more members from a family go, the cost drops to \$2,650 per person. Attendees must get to Miami on July 26 to make the charter flight to Havana on July 27. Housing is at the beachfront Hotel Atlantico in double occupancy rooms, with players housed together or with a family member. Visa, transportation and meals at the hotel are included.

Caliendo serves as general manager of the junket. Former Lockport High School coach Jim Hall is coach of the traveling team, but Caliendo likely will assist him on the field.

### **Let's play two?**

Caliendo plans to play "at least a game a day. A couple of days we'd want to play two. We want to practice with the Cuban teams a couple of times. It would be a great aspect for our teams.

"These guys are really, really good at all levels. This will be one of the biggest markets for professional baseball. It'll compete heavily with the Dominican market."

Only a small minority on both sides, though, will be of professional quality. So Caliendo wants to bring the two countries together for the pure sake of competition.

"These won't be National Team players," he said. "It'll give the kids an opportunity to see talent in another country. The Cubans will compete against American players and



**Pete Caliendo also knows top pro baseball figures, meeting the likes of Nationals GM Mike Rizzo (left) and Diamondbacks president Tony La Russa (center).**

meet American players. Most never met an American. This will be a great opportunity for players and coaches. It will be a great exchange of education. We will see each other's [styles of] games.

“I want our kids to see how they play with basically nothing -- any kind of bat, any kind of glove, any kind of field. But [the players will see] how athletic they are. How they play the game with joy and fun and smiles. Also how hard they play the game. How aggressive they are. They just come right at you.”

As with the Rays players amazed by their reception on the field, Caliendo's amateurs figure to get the experience of a lifetime away from the field.

Said Caliendo: “Baseball comes naturally, but we want to make sure they understand culture and food, and meet people. See old Havana.”

Through baseball, the opposing teams will realize they are brothers. Let the family reunion begin and spread through both countries.