



Era of good feelings boosted by Caliendo's Cuba baseball trip

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Pete Caliendo hardly had time to savor his youth-baseball trip to Cuba over the week-end of Aug. 6-7.

He flew out of Cuba Saturday morning, made the connection to Chicago in Miami and got home in the late afternoon. The longtime coach and youth baseball advocate had just enough time to say hello to his wife and two dogs in Schaumburg before he had to re-pack his bags and catch a non-stop flight to Tokyo at midday Sunday.

He captained yet another baseball trip, by his 13-year-olds in Team America and then was scheduled to stay on for the World Children's Baseball Fair, featuring a five-day camp headlined by all-time Japanese slugger Sadaharu Oh. The top baseball globe-trotter of the year had to be Caliendo, an Elmwood Park native, president of Caliendo Sports International and vice president of the international sports group of the World Baseball Softball Federation.

He had to leave the Cuban trip early to make the previously-scheduled, locked-in Japan junket. The younger of his two traveling teams was still playing in Cuba as he jetted off to the Far East.

But Caliendo was so upbeat on the results of his cooperative venture with the Cuban Baseball Federation he hardly needed a plane to fly the 14 hours to Japan.

"I think it turned out even better because we had a Cuban tour guide the whole time, morning to night, through games and touring," he said. "That guy was able to be open and tell us about Cuba, the history, the culture, the restrictions, is it getting better? He said ask me any question. He answered them. But you could still see a little caution in saying too much."



On the left is Pedro Medina, one of the Cuban National Team's all-time catchers and power hitters. All three are in front of the big Havana stadium that hosted the Tampa Bay Rays-Cuban starts team attended by two presidents during spring training.

The needle in opening up Cuba is still moving forward, deliberately by any measure, but Caliendo knows progress when he sees it.

“In 2006, when I went to the Olympic qualifier for two weeks, you could not have your (Cuban) friends come to a restaurant at the hotel and eat with you,” he said. “But now they all can go to the places where the tourists are. I think it’s a big change.”

That Caliendo can move about Cuba expeditiously was a given, in the common language of baseball. Long close with top officials — including ruling-family member Tony Castro — in the country’s baseball governing body, he was always comfortable. But the trip involving two teams, for which the federation gave its enthusiastic blessing, was more about advancing the knowledge and understanding about both American players and their Cuban opponents.

Caliendo served as general manager of the trip, assembling two traveling teams. One was high school seniors through mid-college (age 20). The younger team was 14-to-16.

Older team roster was comprised of Connor Hogan, Ross Nations, Brady West, Julies Roman, Trevor Blizzard, Andrew Clavenna, Kenneth Alexa, Zachary Speaker, Nolan Gazouski, Kevin Carmondy Kevin Jackson, Anthony Aducci and Justin Sartori. All but Oregonian Blizzard were from Illinois.

Manager was Jim Hall, assisted by coaches Chris Hogan, Ryan Clavenna and Jon Guzzo, who handled the pitching.

The 14-to-16 team included five Texas players: Christian Murphy, Jack Zamarippa, Andrew Linseisen, Cameron Frezon and Julian Meza. Two hailed from Wisconsin: Marcus and Charles Robsinon. Connor Burns was the one Illinois player. The younger group had a true international flavor with five Cuban players permitted to play on their side.

The 14-to-16 team was coached by two Texans: Pat Reid and Roman Zamrippa.

“The obvious (benefit) is the kids are very fortunate (to realize they live) in a great country with freedom of speech, which the Cubans still don’t have as much as we think they do,” Caliendo said.

Slim wages and diet

“And they heard the average person in Cuba lives on \$30 a month. To understand that was eye-opening for the kids.

“You take a chef, a cook or maid in the tourist industry, and they make more than doctors, orthopedic surgeons, brain surgeons and lawyers. One time they had to stop and make it illegal for the highly-educated to switch to the tourist industry to make more money.”

To just go out to a fast-food restaurant or Dairy Queen after a youth-baseball game, in traditional U.S. fashion, is not an option in Cuba.

“The Cubans get so many pounds of meat, so many pounds of rice, so many pounds of oil. It’s not a lot of food, for a month, and they have to make it last. The kids had the

buffet at the hotel. They could see when the Cuban driver and guide come in the hotel and eat with us. For them to eat at the buffet for a week was like a festival.”

Initially, Caliendo’s teams faced even competition. Their Cuban opponents’ best pitching was otherwise occupied in tournaments. Overall, Cuban teams are very instinctive athletically, with the ability to play year-round and to thus improve execution by repetition. They fall short of their U.S. counterparts in modern tools available to coaches.

“Some of them only have 10 baseballs to use for 25 players,” Caliendo said. “How do you keep everybody active?”

But the baseball federation sought to advance the ball by allowing several Cuban coaches to work the dugout with Hall and his staff to view the game from the Americans’ perspective. And they had no arguments with a daily infusion of new and better equipment, starting with more baseballs.

“The Cubans were thrilled to meet our players and their families,” Caliendo said. “After every game, we would line up, shake hand and then give them a gift, each player and coaches. They’d trade things. The Cubans traded up. Our players gave them the best equipment, the Cubans had average. It was like gold for them. Their eyes lit up when they saw the equipment. They’d take really good care of it.”



The Changa Mederos Field on which Pete Caliendo's teams played on their Cuban trip.

Cuba will benefit two-fold financially when the powers-that-be finally open up their talent spigot to MLB teams. The government likely will still maintain control of the bidding process, like Japanese teams with their talent, Caliendo projected. The winning bids will go right into government coffers. Once the star Cubans cash in across the Straits of Florida, they’ll surely send good portions of their mega-million contracts back home to family to infuse in the local economy.

Coaches’ clinic planned for November

Caliendo’s relations with his hosts were so adept he’ll come back to Havana, pending visas’ approval, to run a clinic for youth coaches, projected for November.

“I spoke to them and they were enthusiastic about it,” he said. “How are coaches supposed to learn now? They can’t get on the internet, as their internet and e-mail access is limited. They can’t learn technology-wise.”

In the end, baseball proved to be the best kind of diplomacy to preserve the good feelings from the Tampa Bay Rays-Cuban All-Star game in spring training attended by Presidents Obama and Raul Castro.

“From the Cubans’ standpoint, they knew Americans were great people, Caliendo said.

“But this really emphasized it, seeing how friendly our players and coaches were, how open our parents were. They wanted to give things to them, wanted to help. So it opened up the Cubans’ eyes that Americans are giving people.

“I got the impression that they hope America comes in, not to run their country, but to just be there, be friends.”

Players and coaches interested in future foreign trips under Caliendo's direction can contact him at petercaliendo@icloud.com.

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