



Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez does a live-action time trip to mimick the sculpture of him pointing in celebration in Game 3 of the Division Series against the Red Sox in 2005. This was the first time Hernandez has seen the sculpture, part of the permanent bronzed honor to the White Sox '05 World Series champs outside U.S. Cellular Field's main entrance. Photo courtesy of Chicago White Sox.

## *Life definitely imitates art for El Duque at The Cell*

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez could only do one thing when he spied his 2005 image commemorated in sculpture outside U.S. Cellular Field.

His likeness captured El Duque's pure joy by pointing after working out of a bases-loaded, no-out jam to strike out Johnny Damon in the sixth inning of Game 3 of the Division Series on Oct. 7, 2005 at Fenway Park.

So the crafty Cuban did what came natural. He pointed again, in the same direction, live action mimicking bronzed history.

Hernandez certainly brought smiles and fond memories when he took part in a special program profiling Cuban baseball, featuring the four Cuban-born White Sox, at U.S. Cellular Field on June 17. In turn, seeing the sculpture for the first time brought back all the thankfulness he had for earning the last of his four World Series rings on the South Side.

"I should definitely give thanks to the White Sox for keeping them (the '05 team) in mind with regard to the statue," El Duque said through an interpreter. "It was an important World Series win. Again, it was nice commemorating the team."

With the White Sox clinging to a 4-3 lead, manager Ozzie Guillen pulled starter Freddy Garcia after Manny Ramirez led off the sixth with a home run. Reliever Damaso Marte then loaded the bases on a single and two walks. But El Duque, a cool cat with a 9-3 postseason record from his battle-tested Yankees days, got Jason Varitek and ex-Sox Tony Graffanino on infield pops. He worked the count full to lefty hitter Johnny Damon, then fooled him on a half-swing ruled strike three.

No, El Duque does not flash back every day to the memory of Damon futilely trying to hold up.

“I don’t think about it from day to day,” he said. “I don’t think about baseball from day to day. But if I see Johnny Damon on occasion, it will kind of bring back the memories. I’m reminded of the team and effort and everything put that was put forth to get that World Series.”

### **Damon whiff first of 4 K’s in relief stint**

Hernandez got into whiff mode with the Damon “K.” He struck out Edgar Renteria and David Ortiz to start the seventh. El Duque spun perhaps the greatest Sox clutch relief job in modern times. He allowed just one hit in three innings, finishing with a flourish by fanning Varitek to end the eighth. The Sox won 5-3 to sweep the series, booking an ALCS date with the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, the mid-point on their championship journey.



**ESPN's Pedro Gomez (right) interviews Orlando Hernandez as Sox shortstop Alexei Ramirez (left) looks on.**

At 39, El Duque was by far the older of two Cuban imports from the Yankees who propelled the Sox forward to the big prize in '05. He joined fellow right-hander Jose Contreras in the rotation as the fifth starter with a 9-9 record. With rotations not going that deep in October, El Duque adjusted to his long-relief role at just the right time.

He was used to double duty anyway from his prime days in Cuba.

“It was very common in Cuba to throw a nine-inning complete game, then come in to close next day,” said ESPN’s Pedro Gomez, host of the Cuban baseball program.

El Duque rotation mate Mark Buehrle is pitching like a Cuban now, defying the clock at 35 and still getting outs with smarts and control as the AL’s best starter with a 10-3 rec-

ord and 2.28 ERA as a Toronto Blue Jay. Buehrle also imitated Hernandez by pitching in relief in Game 3 of the World Series in Houston.

“He’s always been very professional,” El Duque said. “I’m not surprised at all given his level of dedication. He helped us a lot about learning the respect of the game.”

### **Bundled in deal for Vazquez**

There would be only that one season of heroics for Hernandez. The Sox bundled him with outfield prospect Chris Young to go younger with more “stuff” in the rotation in a postseason deal with the Arizona Diamondbacks for the up-and-down Javier Vazquez.

Although El Duque called the Sox an “organization that treated me very well,” he surprisingly said he regretted leaving and asked for “forgiveness” during the Cuban baseball program – even though then-GM Kenny Williams dispatched him in a deal. Williams, sitting nearby, responded “that inning in Boston made up for it.”

Hernandez is at the front of the wave of Cuban talent that slipped out of their homeland to the big leaguers. Many have made it, but one superstar opted to stay put. El Duque believes Omar Linares was the big one who got away despite being offered a blank check by the Yankees. Linares was the best Cuban to not have played in the U.S.

“He could do it all,” he said. “There was not one aspect of game he did not excel at. If he wanted to pitch, he could have done that.”

While touting the Cubans on the come, El Duque does not forget history.

“It’s a great sense of pride,” he said. “It’s something that’s necessary. We pay homage to earlier generations (like Minnie Minoso). It’s important for young Cubans to show what we’re capable of (because of long gap in the talent flow during the Castro regime). It’s the only way to be able to get those players to come here and show what we’re capable of. I’m very thankful to the United States to give all those to come from Cuba the opportunity to (thrive here).

“Thanks for Minnie to pave the way, but we never heard what he did after 1959 (Castro’s takeover year). It’s taken a little while for the reinforcements to arrive.”

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## ***Baseball helps cross the great divide between Cuba, U.S.***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian*

Most of us can’t yet go to Havana, so the next-best thing is Havana coming to us.

A sultry early-summer morning at U.S. Cellular Field was as good of a time as any to bridge the gap of cultural understanding that on the map is just 90 miles, but might as well be from planet to planet since 1960 or so. The White Sox have staged some fascinating historical and cultural programs that have related to baseball over the years, and focusing on Cuban baseball the other day was in keeping with that fine tradition.

Assembled in the ballpark's Conference and Learning Center were their four Cuban-born players: top MLB rookie Jose Abreu, hot hitter Alexei Ramirez, outfielder Dayan Viciedo and catcher Adrian Nieto. Spicing up the show was the return of Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez, a 2005 World Series Sox pitching hero. And, as always, Minnie Minoso was on hand to link one era to another and remind all baseball's just a game, to always be enjoyed like a little kid.

All contributed to the education of the audience about Cuban people, culture and baseball. They drew the curtain more on a closed society everyone hopes will freely open up in upcoming years with the eventual passing of ruling brothers Fidel and Raul Castro.

"It's not as important if Fidel dies," Hernandez said through translator Pedro Gomez, an ESPN reporter and host of the program. "We're just seeking a free

Cuba. As a church-following man, I don't wish the death of anybody. I'd like the country to be free so we can come and go as we please. And ballplayers can come here. Not just ballplayers, but any professional."

Having been in the United States the longest, El Duque likely felt the most comfort in speaking freely. Abreu is only out of Cuba a couple of years, Viciedo somewhat longer. Once nicknamed the "Cuban Missile," Ramirez has been here the better part of a decade. Only Nieto grew up mostly in the United States after emigrating from Cuba at 4.

The language of baseball, with all its commonalities between English and Spanish, helps bridge the gap. So does an organization like the Sox that has been active in signing the newest wave of Cuban players who have revived a traditional talent pipeline that once brought Minoso and other stars here in pre-Castro days.

"When are the doors going to open?," asked Peter Bjarkman, Cuban baseball expert and operator of the BaseballdeCuba.com site. "Nobody knows the answer to that question. But we will see more Cubans coming in. Cuban baseball is coming back. The White Sox have been in the forefront with four players on Opening Day roster. I credit the White Sox with a leading role."

### **From Cuban-league umpire to Ernie Harwell listener**

The Miami-raised Gomez used the love of baseball as his own family's history. Grandfather Isaac Gonzalez used to drive a sugar train in the province of Camaguey. In the winter leagues, Gonzalez was an umpire.



**Part of the panel for the Sox's Cuban baseball program are (from left) Minnie Minoso, Adrian Nieto, Jose Abreu, Dayan Viciedo and Alexei Ramirez.**

“His greatest moment was when he ejected Tommy Lasorda,” Gomez said of the then-Dodgers farmhand lefty.

Transplanted to Detroit, Gonzalez cut through the language barrier by listening to Ernie Harwell’s Tigers radio broadcasts.

“It would be the third or fourth inning and he would recite everything that happened,” Gomez said. “He spoke baseball.”

Gomez may be American in citizenship, but Cuban in culture. He was told by family members, “It was always you are Cuban, you are Cuban,” he said.

Nieto feels similarly, but also has a sense of loss not experiencing baseball in his native land. He has vague memories of being taken to a Cuban league game while very young.

“The energy of the stadium was crazy,” he said. “In a way I kind of wish I stayed and played against them. I’m playing with these guys day in and day out. I’m kind of sad I didn’t get to see it, but there’s YouTube.”

Whenever the quality of player from the Cuban leagues is discussed, Abreu’s name is the one most frequently mentioned today. One of the top recent Sox signees of any national origin, he was both American League rookie and player of the month for April. Nieto has an even better description.

### **Abreu the ‘Cuban Babe Ruth’**

“I call him the Cuban Babe Ruth – the same power,” he said.

Arriving late for the program, Abreu first apologized for his tardiness, which is indicative of his gentlemanly personality in his stellar break-in to the majors. He also noted the radical differences between U.S. and Cuban baseball, including the conveniences to the ballpark.

“I have myself in that horse-drawn buggy, that’s all that goes through my mind,” Abreu said, through Gomez, of the Cuban version of a ballplayer’s horsepower.

Indeed, El Duque said while playing in Cuba, a player doesn’t get a breakfast of champions. A breakfast may not be even assured.

“(The difference is in) how you travel and how you eat,” he said. “How you get home, how you get to the stadium. It’s a bicycle compared to a car. You eat steak here, you eat a piece of fried-you-don’t-know-what there.



**Jose Abreu was called the "Cuban Babe Ruth" by Sox teammate Adrian Nieto.**

“The level of respect the athlete has in the U.S. is much, much higher than in Cuba.”

No wonder Cuban players go to great lengths, at considerable personal peril, to take their misdirection routes to play here. Like the players in the Negro League, they want to play against the best. At some future date, though, an unfettered migration of Cuban players to the U.S. may doom their league to the same fate as the all-black league here. Freedom does have its price.

### **Promise to mom to play at the highest level**

“I made my promise to my mother I would try to play at the highest level that exists,” shortstop Ramirez said via translation. “I was very, very happy upon signing with Sox, but there was a little bit of unhappiness because my mother, my family was still in Cuba.

“I’d love to finish my career with the White Sox. I love it here. The fans treat me in a wonderful manner. They’ll stop me on the streets and the store and say they love the way I play. They often ask me why I don’t take a day off for rest. I respond I want to be out there every day.”



**After his sudden fame, Jose Abreu now has to become practiced at daily sessions of autographs, as he did at the Cuban baseball program.**

us to all play like him. That’s not possible. There were times when we just didn’t play up to our capabilities under him. If you made a mistake, you were yanked out of the game immediately. That’s no way to play the game.”

There is still some unfinished business for the first generation of Cubans. Gomez reminded Minoso he’s back on the Hall of Fame ballot.

In response, Minnie crossed himself and smiled that trademark Minoso look. Cuban players always feel tomorrow will be a better day.

Ramirez is scheduled to become a U.S. citizen this year, years after El Duque took the oath.

Although they crave for Americanization in their civil rights, they’ll always have their hearts and memories back home. Without the Cuban culture that’s baseball crazy, they wouldn’t be here.

“We play with a lot of passion because that’s how we’re taught the game from when we’re very, very young,” Vicedo said. “We celebrate the game. (Top Cuban coach) Victor Mesa, who was a very flamboyant player, wanted