



2017

MLB

# ALL★STAR GAME



mastercard







# Cuba's

## HOT CORNER

Long a baseball hotbed, the island nation off the Florida coast has produced some of the sport's legends.

BY DAVID CRAWFORD JONES

IN A CENTURIES-LONG NARRATIVE MARKED BY COLONIAL occupation and economic exploitation, as well as the ongoing struggle for cooperation amidst the trauma of exile, baseball has long served a vital role in bridging the 90 nautical miles of ocean separating the Cuban and American historical experience. Having first arrived in the 1860s via Cuban students returning home from studying in the United States, baseball has been an essential part of the Cuban identity for nearly as long as the sport has been in existence.

As a nation, Cuba has embraced baseball with an unrivaled fervency that echoes from the passionate banter of fans debating the finer points of the game at the Esquina Caliente (Hot Corner) of Havana's Parque Central, to the banging of drums and blowing of horns at the Estadio Latinoamericano, the country's largest baseball stadium. Wherever you go on the island, there is no mistaking the vital role that baseball has played in the construction of Cuba's national identity. Cubans first turned to the sport in the 19th century in order to escape Spanish colonial influence, and later challenged the supremacy of the United States in mastering the game that serves as a national obsession for both countries. In their 2003 song "Sonar en Azul," Cuban pop band Buena Fe captures the sport's special significance for Cuba, asking, "Could it be that baseball resembles life? Is it possible that, without it, we could not dream?"

Given the centrality of the sport to Cuban pride, it should come as no surprise that the island has produced some of the greatest legends in baseball history, men who have starred in the Negro Leagues and Major League Baseball, international competitions such as the Olympics and the World Baseball Classic, and, of course, the Cuban professional leagues. Given the rapidly evolving relationship between the two countries in the post-Fidel Castro era, as well as Miami's crucial place in the Cuban-American experience, the 2017 All Star Game is the perfect moment to revisit the greatest Cuban baseball legends, even as more Cuban stars arrive in the Majors every year.

What follows are our picks for the all-time Cuban team; although divided by the political circumstances surrounding their careers, this lineup features the greatest players ever born and raised there.

#### CATCHER

##### ORESTES KINDELAN

In the long history of Cuban baseball, the island's greatest players have frequently faced massive obstacles to playing in the Major Leagues. Prior to 1947, most Cubans were ineligible due to racial segregation, and during the Cold War, countless Cuban stars were prevented from playing in the U.S. due to the frosty relationship between the two countries.

Kindelan fell into the latter category and never played in the Major Leagues despite being one of the greatest sluggers in the history of Cuban baseball. Although Kindelan shifted away from catcher early in his career, his bat made up for any defensive liabilities. Over 21 seasons, he blasted a Cuban record 487 home runs while also winning Olympic gold medals in 1992 and '96. During the 1996 Games in Atlanta, Kindelan smashed nine home runs, including a shot into the third deck of Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, the longest ever hit in the park's 30-year history.

#### FIRST BASE

##### TONY PEREZ

Born in the country's Camaguey region, Perez spent his teenage years working at a sugar factory and playing baseball for the local team. In 1960, Perez signed with the Cincinnati Reds; due to the worsening political climate, he would not see his home country again for more than a decade. "I could feel it in my bones,"



KINDELAN



**TRAVEL TEAMS**

Even as Cuban ballplayers have tested their skills in the United States, occasionally the flow of talent has gone in the other direction, with American stars traveling to Cuba. Over the last two decades, both the Baltimore Orioles (1999) and Tampa Bay Rays (2016) have played exhibition games against the Cuban national team, in an effort to foster friendlier relations between two countries long divided by political ideology.

Yet prior to the 1959 Revolution, Cuba's Winter League was a frequent destination for American stars looking to sharpen their skills in the offseason. During its 61-year history, the Winter League hosted countless Negro League greats, from Oscar Charleston and Josh Gibson to Satchel Paige and Bill Foster, as well as Major Leaguers such as Ty Cobb, Jim Bunning and Brooks Robinson. The latter was actually on the island as Fidel Castro battled against the pro-American government of Fulgencio Batista. "We heard bombs going off and we knew Castro was in the mountains and Batista was there," Robinson later recalled. "We would have a bomb go off in the city and then one went off behind the ballpark one time, so we knew there were some things happening." —DJ



he once confessed, "how I missed the heat of my country and the love of my family."

During his 16 seasons in Cincinnati, the first baseman helped the Big Red Machine to two world championships. He finished his career with 379 home runs and 1,652 RBI. For his achievements, he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2000.

**SECOND BASE**

**YULIESKI GURRIEL**

Prior to signing with the Houston Astros in 2016, Gurriel dominated Cuba's National Series for 15 seasons, batting .300 or better 13 times while also emerging as one of the country's greatest power hitters. The second baseman's most impressive campaign came in 2008, when he hit .399 with a .710 slugging percentage. That season also marked the second of five straight in which he smacked 20 or more home runs.

Having crushed both Cuban baseball and international competition, Gurriel decided at age 32 that it was time to test himself in the Majors. "I still had that thing inside me that I had never played in the Big Leagues and didn't know how I would fare," he says. "I didn't want my career to end without finding out."

**THIRD BASE**

**OMAR LINARES**

The most accomplished player in the history of Cuban baseball, Linares also just might be the greatest third baseman who ever lived. During his 20-year career in the Cuban National Series, the five-tool prodigy and native of Pinar Del Rio province dominated like no hitter before him, shattering records with a .368 career batting average — including three seasons in which he hit better than .400 — and 1,221 RBI, while also ranking third all-time with 404 career home runs.

He was just as impressive in international competition, winning gold medals in the Olympics and Pan-American Games. Yet amid rumors of lucrative offers to lure the star off the island, Linares remained loyal to Cuba. "I have all of my family here and the Revolution has given me everything," he once explained. "It has permitted me to study, to practice sports, and to reach the level I have reached."

**SHORTSTOP**

**GERMAN MESA**

Playing alongside Linares in the infield of the great Cuban national teams of the 1990s was Mesa, the brilliant shortstop whose glove redefined excellence for a whole generation of Cubans. When the young Havana-born phenom Rey Ordóñez debuted with the Mets in 1996, he responded to media attempts at crowning him the game's best defensive player by proclaiming, "No, I am just a prince. The king is in Cuba, and his name is German Mesa."

Video evidence confirms the statement, as Mesa can be seen bouncing around the infield making plays like Ozzie Smith in his prime, with whom he was frequently compared. Yet Mesa was also an accomplished hitter, finishing his Cuban career with a .285 average and 335 stolen bases.

#### OUTFIELD

##### MINNIE MINOSO

The first black player in Chicago White Sox history, Minoso reached the Majors in 1951 having already played in the Cuban Winter League and Negro National League. Dubbed "The Cuban Comet," Minoso demonstrated dazzling speed on the South Side, prompting fans to chant "Go! Go!" every time he reached first base and thus inspiring the sobriquet that would define the White Sox teams of the 1950s.

The first Cuban ever named to an MLB All-Star team, Minoso enjoyed an unprecedented baseball odyssey thanks to his unrivaled passion for the game. Following his last season in the Majors in 1964, Minoso played in Mexico for a decade, ultimately finishing his professional career with more than 4,000 hits collected across three different countries.

#### OUTFIELD

##### CRISTOBAL TORRIENTE

The greatest hitter in the history of pre-revolutionary Cuban baseball, Torriente split his playing career between Cuba and the Negro Leagues, in which the barrel-chested left-hander compiled a .347 average and .520 slugging percentage in 17 seasons from 1913–32. "Torriente batted cleanup, but he was much more than a power hitter," one scout observed, noting that he "was also a master at bunting, baserunning and defense."

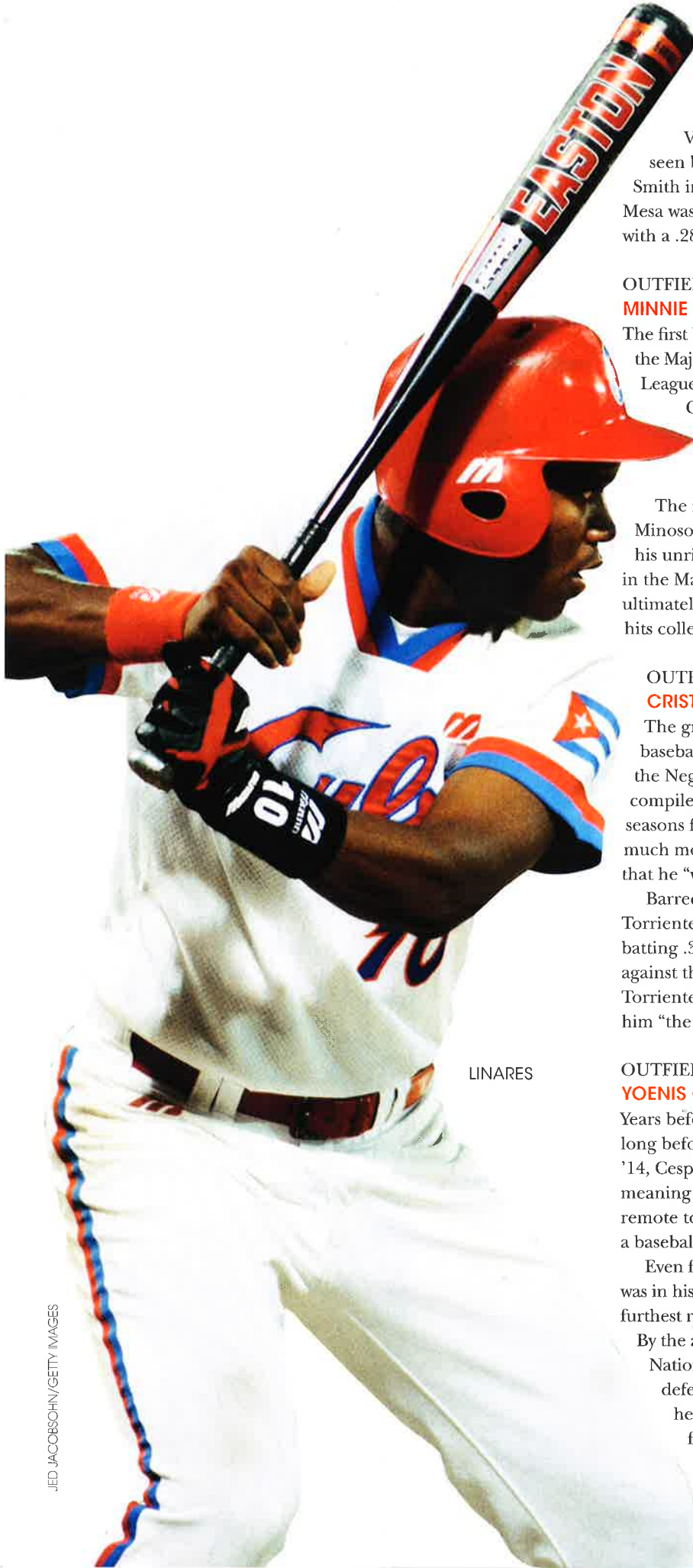
Barred from organized baseball due to the color of his skin, Torriente excelled in exhibitions played against Major Leaguers, batting .313 in 86 plate appearances. In one memorable contest against the New York Giants at Havana's Almendares Park, Torriente smacked three homers, leading reporters to crown him "the black Babe Ruth."

#### OUTFIELD

##### YOENIS CESPEDES

Years before he sparked the Mets to an NL pennant in 2015, and long before he won back-to-back Home Run Derbies in 2013 and '14, Céspedes was known to his friends in Cuba as La Potencia, meaning "The Power." Growing up in the impoverished and remote town of Campechuela, Céspedes first learned to hit with a baseball bat made out of a tree branch.

Even from those humble beginnings, it was clear that hitting was in his blood, as he regularly clobbered home runs into the furthest reaches of the grassy fields where he first played the game. By the age of 17, Céspedes was playing for Granma of the Cuban National Series, with whom he would hit 169 homers before defecting to the Dominican Republic in 2011. From there, he journeyed to the United States, where he's since been forging his legend against Big League competition.



LINARES



## CUBA'S HOT CORNER

### UTILITY

#### MARTIN DIHIGO

The most versatile — and perhaps greatest — baseball player ever, Dihigo could have appeared at several positions on this list. During a career spanning 1923–47, Dihigo was easily baseball's most valuable player, alternating between the pitcher's mound, where he racked up victories and strikeouts with a superlative fastball, and the infield and outfield, where he made expert use of his blazing foot speed and rocket throwing arm.

No matter the position, the “Maestro” was a feared hitter who routinely ranked among the leaders of the Mexican, Dominican, Cuban and Negro Leagues in home runs and batting average, astonishing all whose paths he crossed. As legendary Negro Leagues Manager Cum Posey observed, “Dihigo’s gifts afield have never been approached by any man — black or white.”

### STARTING PITCHER

#### ORLANDO HERNANDEZ

From Dolf Luque to Luis Tiant, Cuba has produced some of the most electric starting pitchers in baseball history. Among this distinguished crop of hurlers, our choice is “El Duque” Hernandez, who excelled in both the Cuban National Series and the Major Leagues during a 19-year career, winning a combined six championships.

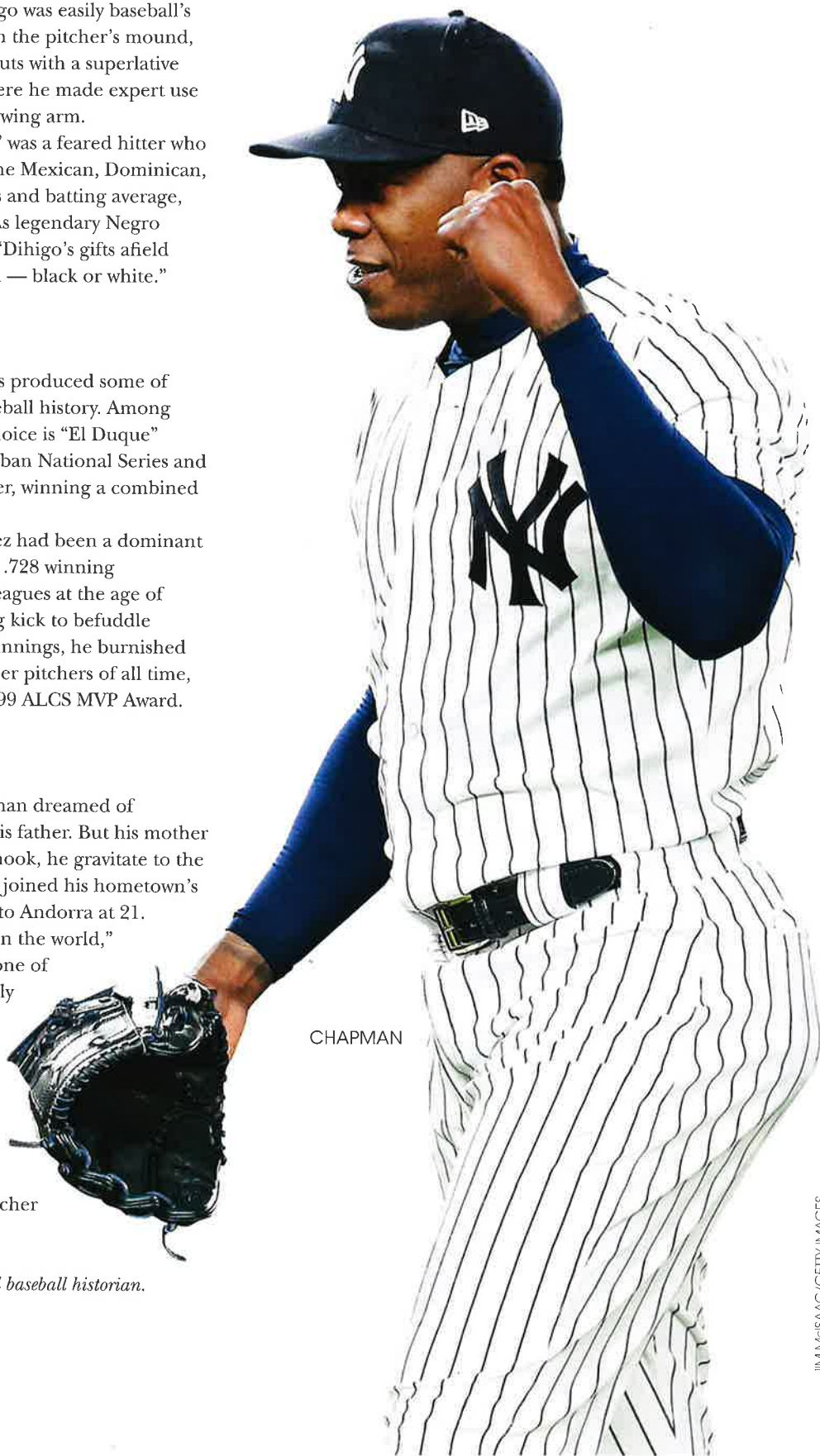
Prior to his 1997 defection, Hernandez had been a dominant force in Cuba, posting an all-time record .728 winning percentage. Upon reaching the Major Leagues at the age of 32, Hernandez relied on his signature leg kick to befuddle Major League hitters. In 106 postseason innings, he burnished a reputation as one of the greatest October pitchers of all time, posting a 2.55 ERA and capturing the 1999 ALCS MVP Award.

### RELIEF PITCHER

#### AROLDIS CHAPMAN

As a child growing up in Holguin, Chapman dreamed of becoming a boxer like those trained by his father. But his mother insisted that, despite his devastating left hook, he gravitate to the less violent pursuit of baseball. Chapman joined his hometown's professional team at 17 before defecting to Andorra at 21. Declaring, “I want to be the best pitcher in the world,” Chapman quickly established himself as one of the game's elite closers, becoming the only pitcher in baseball history to average more than 15 strikeouts per nine innings (to date) for his career. The left-hander used his massive wingspan and perfect mechanics to unleash the greatest fastball in the history of the sport, famously topping out at 105 mph and making him the hardest-throwing pitcher in history. ♦

*David Crawford Jones is a freelance writer and baseball historian.*



CHAPMAN