

Baseball: A Universal Language in Two Different Worlds

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A hit is a hit, and an out is an out regardless of politics, history or embargoes.

The infield field is a patch of dirt, almost in the shape of a diamond. No baselines, no mound, no backstop. Rocks the size of a baseball glove mark first, second and third base. Home plate is a black rubber slab in its traditional shape. The outfield grass is uneven. A passed ball, foul ball or errant throw often ends up in the middle of the Malecon, one of the busiest streets in Havana.



The kids playing appeared to be from nine to thirteen years old. A few dads were there as well (two of them playing, one of them was the umpire). Not everyone had a hat, nobody wore batting gloves, and the shortstop for one of the teams wasn't wearing shoes. There were no more than five mitts between the two teams and just two bats and one ball. Between innings a fielder coming off who was lucky enough to have a glove would toss his mitt to a fielder coming on.

The umpire asked me where I was from. I responded, "The United States." He smiled and said something in broken English about the Yankees. He then pointed to various players on the field while saying names like Derek Jeter or Alex Rodriguez.

Eventually two players had to leave. The umpire pointed to fellow Penn State student Eric Deberardinis and me and invited us to take the two players' spots.

We walked over to the cement blocks behind home plate where the players sit. Next thing I know, Eric is pitching and I'm on deck.

I introduced myself, but for most of the day they would call me "America." Eric was "Pitcher."

I stepped up to the plate. The bat is small for me. I take a cut and hit a grounder in the hole over towards shortstop for an infield hit. Though first base is a rock, it's not too different than playing a pickup game of stickball in the street.

The inning ends and Eric comes up to bat. He tees off on a pitch and hits a shot to deep left field. In his next at-bat, the pitcher would brush him off the plate multiple times and throw him curveballs and knuckleballs.

They throw me a glove and I put it on my hand. It was like wearing a tight, floppy oven mitt. They had used shoelaces, twine and what appeared to be strips of a plastic bag wound tightly enough to hold the glove together.

The game ended a few innings later and the umpire came over to me, shook my hand and gave me a hug. We shook hands with all of the other players, said our round of "adios" and "muchas gracias" and left.