

# BASEBALL DIGEST



## ALL STAR EDITION



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*By Abe J. Schear*  
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Baseball we have long said is an American sport and, of course, that includes all of America. In fact, the history of baseball in the Caribbean (and in Cuba in particular) is every bit as passionate and colorful as it is in the United States.

Tommy Goodman evokes that passion and is Executive Director of the Caribbean Educational Baseball Foundation. As such, he has explored how baseball can bring people and countries closer together, relying on that little white ball to stimulate mutual interests.

As you will read, the history of baseball in countries like Cuba is similar to that in the United States, though it is more about the game and less about the business. Tommy shares with us the emotions of Caribbean baseball in a way that will encourage many to explore the shared histories and, perhaps, even go watch a game or two.

Thanks so much to my friend, Jay Epstein, for this introduction.

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### Tommy Goodman "A Baseball Ambassador"

**Schear: I am talking with Tommy Goodman. Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Reston, Virginia.

**Did your family like baseball?**

Yes, my family loved baseball. Believe it or not, I played soccer mostly growing up but I was a huge baseball fan. There were no Nationals back then so we had to drive up to Baltimore to see professional baseball, but we loved doing it.

**Who were your favorite players for the Orioles?**

Cal Ripkin, far and away the favorite. Again, different teams, different players. Brady Anderson, Mike Mussina before he went to the evil empire, the Yankees,

enjoyed listening to it as well throughout the summer. It always provided the cadence of the evening. There was the regularity of the broadcast whether I listened to TV or radio, so it didn't matter.

**What are your first memories of baseball?**

I don't know if this is my first, but my clearest is opening day at Camden Yards (April 6, 1992). I was a teenager by then so that when the magic of this sport occurred, especially watching it live, kind of hit me. Even today, there is nothing like that stadium and that stadium packed on an April day was even more magical with a 2-0 Orioles win.

**"The mission statement is to build youth focused bridges between the US and our Caribbean neighbors with a shared passion for baseball."**

and a couple of others were favorites.

**Did you play baseball as a youngster?**

Not much. I played some neighborhood baseball. I was limited to one sport by my parents and that was soccer. I tell people I like to watch movies even though I'm not an actor. I was always a fan of watching baseball.

**Did you watch it? I guess you were young enough so you never listened to it much on the radio. You probably watched it on TV.**

I did a combination of both. I always

Rick Sutcliffe pitched a three hit shutout. There was a fly-by, so a lot of excitement because Baltimore is a great baseball town and, with that new stadium, it just reached a new level. So that's not my first, but my clearest memory.

**And the ballpark really revitalized not only downtown but a neighborhood as well.**

Our tradition with my dad and my mom was to go out and get crab cakes for lunch at the inner harbor and walk over to the game. I remember two years

later, the All Star Game was there along with the home run derby and all the excitement around the stadium. There were all these other things to do around there besides the inner harbor so it was awesome.

**When you were little did you throw ball with your siblings or parents?**

**How did you learn how to play?**

Not much. Mostly just neighborhood kids. Like I said, I was not into organized baseball so it was mostly just

things. When I got to law school, I took international law classes and sport law classes and I realized that a lot of what sports laws are is really domestic laws with sports related issues. I also realized that being a sports agent, though there are elements of sports law, it was as much a business and salesmanship as anything else. I tried to become involved in sports and baseball for a little while and I just focused on the international affairs. I moved to DC after law school,

other parts of Central America. I learned through research and through talking to people. I started to travel down there. The initiative had to be started from the grass roots level. The model of the Cohen Group was really to get hand in glove with the client so you become a member of the client's team. Over time I became a trusted member and through trips to Cuba, dealing with folks related to Cuban affairs in Washington, at the Cuban Embassy and at the State Department, then I really became one and the same with the client and that led me onto the path I'm on today.

**You are with the Cohen Group now?**

Nope. I left about 18 months ago to become the first Executive Director of the Caribbean Educational Baseball Foundation. For a while, I was with the Cohen Group working for this organization and they were a client, but then they became a non-profit organization and they needed an Executive Director so now that's the only hat I wear.

**What are the initiatives there and how that is going?**

The mission statement is to build youth focused bridges between the US and our Caribbean neighbors with a shared passion for baseball. It was started by a former general manager of the Pawtucket Red Sox, Lou Schwechheimer. He now leads an investment group that owns the Marlins' AAA team (which is now the New Orleans Baby Cakes, but is moving to Wichita starting next year) and the Port Charlotte Stone Crabs. He

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**“Baseball really is the common language that we both speak.”**

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through watching the Orioles and playing with kids in the neighborhood.

**And did you collect baseball cards when you were a child?**

Oh yeah. I don't collect them now but I still have them all. I can't even put a number on it.

**I still have mine. It's nice when you come from a family of collectors as opposed to cleaners. That's all I can figure. No reason I still have my cards from when I grew up except my mother never threw anything away.**

**So tell me, somehow you got into the business of baseball. I know after high school you went to college and after college you got a job. Why don't you tell me how you got from the end of college to being involved in baseball, because it certainly is an interesting, circuitous route.**

With the foundation of being a baseball fan as a kid and collecting baseball cards and playing in the neighborhood, I didn't know how that would marry up to a professional career. I got my interest in traveling and seeing the world when I studied abroad in Spain. After graduating from University of Virginia, I wanted to continue sort of exploring the world so I got a job as a school teacher in Costa Rica for three years. Right after that I went to law school and I thought maybe through the law I could get back into baseball as my professional career. The movie “Jerry Maguire” had come out and being a sports agent might be the way to do it, combining that with my passion for traveling and international

tried a bunch of different things in the legal space, worked for the federal government, worked for a law firm, and I wasn't satisfied. Then I ended up moving over to the Cohen Group, which is an international business advisory firm headed by former Secretary of Defense, Bill Cohen.

I started to get satisfied with the international aspects. From there, around 2012, I got an email from my boss and the subject line was :”Cuba baseball” and there was a client who at the time was a Triple A general manager for the Pawtucket Red Sox who had a really fascinating project involving Cuba related to baseball. So, for me, it was a turning point in my career and my life. Finally my interest in international affairs was going to be wed with my

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**“The Cincinnati Reds had their Triple A team in Havana.”**

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interest in sports because I was tapped into client needs for that project and that led to all of my work in Cuba and the other parts of the Caribbean.

**Did you just have an opportunity because you were at the Cohen Group? Was this a big group or was this sort of an exploratory mission to work in Latin America and in Cuba?**

I already came with that background. I was a teacher in Costa Rica and studied in Spain and had traveled throughout Latin America. That was my area of specialty. I had worked a lot in Mexico,

first traveled to Cuba 15 years ago and established a vision. We wanted to build a bridge despite the political difficulties. There were a lot of years of mistrust between the US and Cuba, but despite all that, baseball really is the common language that we both speak. We set out to help make relations better through this board and also to help the kids in Cuba because they have the passion but they don't have a lot of resources.

We also did research and recognized that this bridge went way back. In the

1960's, when the first Cuban ballplayers actually studied at Springhill College in Mobile, Alabama, they brought bats and gloves back to Cuba and baseball

parts of the region. So we have active programs in Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. I have had conversations with folks in Aruba,

**“The smile you see on their faces, it’s like nothing you’ve ever seen.”**

thereafter became popular on the islands. The first organized team was played in Cuba in 1874. So it’s almost 150 years ago and almost as long as they’ve been playing baseball in the US. Unlike other countries and parts of the world, Cuba made baseball popular through the US military presence and otherwise. There is unique history and unique evolution of the sport. It evolved separately from baseball here because for decades it’s been on its own. Prior to the split, and I mean the revolution, the Cincinnati Reds had their Triple A team in Havana. It was called the Havana Sugar Kings (1946-1960). Lou saw this history and thought that maybe someday affiliated baseball can return to Cuba. We set out to sort of build the bridge through this goodwill initiative with the hope that one day affiliated baseball would return to Cuba. So now, the way it stands is we

Mexico, Curacao and we will just see where those conversations take us.

**People can go to your website and make donations?**

They can. Yes.

**The website is?**

baseballdiplomacy.org

**Tell me, I’m guessing that the youth of all countries are very responsive, notwithstanding the governments.**

Yes. There is nothing like giving a kid who’s never seen or owned his own baseball. The smile you see on their faces, it’s like nothing you’ve ever seen.

**Do you have organized trips to Cuba or other Latin American countries that adults can go on to see baseball, to see fields?**

Yes we do. We organize what we call “experiential trips”, based on our networks and knowledge, especially in Cuba where we tailor sort of an

**“Jackie Robinson actually broke the color barrier in Havana in 1947.”**

have a non-profit called the Caribbean Educational and Baseball Foundation and for the last 4 or 5 years leading back to before Obama’s opening of Cuba – though this now faces more difficult times with Trump – we’ve been working with our counterparts in Cuba on a series of goodwill exchanges. Visits by youth teams from the United States to Cuba, from equipment donations to field renovations, to identifying areas of shared common history and heritage that use baseball to celebrate shared histories. Also, we bring clinics with former major league players.

itinerary to give travelers a very unique educational, baseball focused experience. It includes giving baseballs or other equipment to youth teams and also meeting with managers of the professional teams, visiting baseball artists, historians, journalists, taking tours of the stadiums and, if it is in season, attending games in the evenings. Given some of the difficulties in Cuba, we are also doing this in other countries.

The Dominican Republic is our next big geography of interest. What is unique there is that each major league baseball team has its own academy there so the baseball infrastructure there is a lot more developed. The passion is the same but the infrastructure is more developed so the experience will be a little different. I was just there 2 weeks ago.

**Of the stadiums that you’ve been to,**

**which is your favorite ballpark in Latin America?**

I think there is one in Havana is called La Tropical. It’s called that because back in the 1940’s and 1950’s it was on the property of a brewery there called Tropical Havana. Many spring trainings were held there by major league baseball teams. It’s now the national soccer stadium, Estadio Latinamericano. If you compare how it looks today to how it was used as a baseball field, it’s a very magical feeling and you can sense the presence of the former ballplayers. It’s really special. Jackie Robinson actually broke the color barrier in Havana in 1947 and the Dodgers held their spring training there, thinking there would be less discrimination from fans and media. Some games were in the Grand Stadium. Seeing both stadiums, you remember the history and it has more of an impact.

**What’s the difference between the fans in the Caribbean and Cuba and the fans in the United States?**

Well I think when you go to a game in Cuba the fans are there to see the game. There is a lot less distraction, people aren’t on their phones, they are not in line to buy food or drinks. They’re there with their families, with their friends. They’re watching the game. They are there to watch baseball. There is live music in the stands. You don’t really have a jumbotron, the big advertisements, the clips of yesteryear and games. It’s just baseball. It’s a community gathering. Lou, our founder, likes to say that the baseball stadium is the front porch to the community. The minor league baseball model is about the experience, about families going out and having fun. I don’t think it’s like that much anymore in major league baseball. It’s more just about the business, charging fans.

**How did you get involved with baseball in art?**

Again through the founder and also through a couple of dozen trips to Cuba. We talk about the common passion, the common languages that we speak outside of the politics and baseball and art and music fall within that rubric. We had the good fortune of meeting a baseball artist on one of our first visits and he embodied these characteristics. Baseball is a thing that you can relate to regardless of what

It has been a little slow in Cuba, especially lately. I’m recognizing that other countries in the region have a similar passion for baseball and understand that our programming and our partnerships will include other

your politics are, where you are from. You look at a piece of art and you don't see it the same way as somebody else from a different culture.

When we met this artist, Reynerio Tamayo, he had baseball art portraits and some paintings of American baseball players, Cuban baseball players, Dominican baseball players, players in the Negro leagues, players from today and yesterday. The project that we are most proud of was bringing him up to Washington, D.C. last summer during the All Star Game, and we brought three dozen of his works and had a reception to kick it off. The cultural event brought attention to the common ties that we have with Cuba through the love of baseball and through the love of art. So through the trips that I was referencing earlier, we also bring our travelers to the homes of the baseball artists to learn more about how they can express themselves, especially through their work. It is not the primary focus of our work, but it is a bridge.

**I only have a couple of more questions. Is the Cuban American community, particularly in South Florida, interested and supportive of**

**the initiative that you all have in the Caribbean and Cuba?**

They are. A big part of our strategy is to make sure that any folks that don't appreciate our engagement at least understand why we're doing it and understand the impact. We are youth focused, so while we do have goals to bring the countries closer together, really 1 and 1(a) is to focus on the kids that don't have a lot of resources. Through that lens, it is our mission to explain the impact to people that have their own political reasons. We try to emphasize the benefits for the kids, and we respect everyone's way of doing things.

**Is major league baseball supportive or are they neutral? Is this an initiative that is relevant to major league baseball or is this a parallel mission?**

Well I can't use the word parallel because we are affiliated with two minor league clubs. Minor league clubs have to follow major league baseball. So just like the governments that are involved in all of our work, we respect major league baseball. I think their program, their ideas in Cuba, are different than ours. Thankfully, they reached an agreement with the Cuban Baseball Federation.

They had a license from the Department of Treasury on issues that were related to the Cuban players who were forced to leave through unsavory means and now that's been squashed by the current administration. MLB wants to be sure that Cuban players can get hired and part of that, of course, is helping with Cuban youth baseball development. That said, we want to make sure we don't get too far out in front of MLB.

**If someone was interested in going on a trip to Havana that satisfied their curiosity towards Havana and baseball, what are the lengths of the trips?**

It's not just Havana. We also go to a town called Hershey, which has its own baseball history. [Note: Hershey, Cuba was founded in 1916 by chocolate tycoon Milton S. Hershey. It is 30 miles east of Havana.] We also go to a few other towns where baseball has tradition and history. Usually about 4-5 nights. We try to accommodate busy schedules. That is a model that we follow.

**This is really fascinating to me and I appreciate your time. I look forward to seeing you again soon. Thank you.**

**Tommy Goodman**  
"A Baseball Ambassador"

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