

SI... SI...! PLAY SOFTBALL IN CUBA



Open Ceremonies

SI... SI...! Responding to an article in Senior Softball-USA to play softball in Cuba, I was disappointed to learn that all the reservations were completely filled. This was my punishment for delaying my decision to go to Cuba. However, I requested to be placed on a waiting list, but the Program Director gave me little hope and suggested I sign up for next year (2011). Three months later, I received an e-mail asking if I was still interested in playing softball in Cuba. **SI... SI...!**

This first annual USA-Cuba Senior Softball Classic was scheduled to be played Feb. 16 - Feb. 22, 2010 on fields in Old Havana. I did not know any of the USA players until we met in Miami, the night prior to our departure to Cuba. I met the only other New Jersey player in the group. Rich Tomasik and his wife Candace were from Toms River. My wife, Eleanor, normally accompanies me on tournaments, however she declined this trip because she did not trust the Castro brothers.

There were twenty-six (26) USA players, thirteen (13) assigned to the USA Red team and thirteen (13) assigned to my team, the USA White. The players came from all areas of the country, with Florida, Texas, and California having more than their fare share. Our US group totaled forty (40), which included wives, girlfriends, and tour.

The process to obtain US government permission and approval to travel to Cuba, took the SS-USA approximately one year. In contrast the flight from Miami to Havana was less than one hour, but we were required to be at airport security four (4) hours prior to our 9 A.M. flight. This special security screening caused a 3:30A.M. wake-up call. After we arrived in Cuba our bus drivers and tour guides drove us to our hotel, Hotel Armadores, which was located in Old Havana on the harbor.

We had an opportunity to have batting practice and a practice game against the other USA team. We were scouted by the opposing Cuban players and coaches. The fields were located in Havana near the coast. The proximity to the ocean produced stiff winds. The fields were old but in good condition. The outfield fence was constructed of concrete block.

Seventy (70) percent of the USA players were tournament players, the balance were club players. The average age of the USA players was 67 vs 43 for the

Cuban players. Cuba does have older Senior players, but there was poor communication describing the age group requested for the softball games.

Four Havana teams; Jovenes Del Cerno, Santos Svaret, Eterna Juventud, and Los Amigos Del Tiempo, joined this softball classic. The Cuban players were exceptional athletes, with some reminding me of professional players. They were younger, faster and stronger than the US players.

We lost all our games to the Cuban Teams. The Cubans were impressed with our skills and how we played close games with them. Our USA White team lost by 10, 4, 2, & 1 runs to the Cubans. We defeated the USA Red Team to become the US champions. Our USA White Team was scheduled to play the Cuban champions team, Santos, on the final day, but we were washed out by torrential rains.

Prior to the trip, I was concerned about how the Cuban people would react to the Americans because of the multi-year embargo imposed on Cuba by the US. My concerns disappeared when I met the Cuban people.

They are proud people and very courteous and hospitable to the American visitors. The country and the people are poor, with average wages of \$25/week.

During the week we gave some boys softballs and baseballs. This was the first time any of them had their own ball. They were outrageously thankful.

We also gave the Cuban softball teams gifts of softballs, equipment bags, batting gloves, shirts, caps, shoes, and four brand new Miken Ultra II bats. We made sure the bats were donated after the tournament concluded.

Besides softball we had a busy week in Cuba sightseeing including: 1) walking tour of old Havana: 2) Hemingway House: 3) Revolution Square & Museum: 4) Famous Hotel Nacional for mojitos and entertainment: 5) Scenic day in Pinor Del Rio including a tobacco farm and scenic Vingles Valley: 6) Columbus Cemetery: 7) Tropicana Club entertaining under the stars (since 1939).

We spent hours taking photos of old 50's US cars. Most of the old cars are privately owned and used as taxis. We did not find any Cubans who recognized the name of Dezi Arnez and Lucille Ball. They are isolated from US information.

The last night included a dinner banquet where we said our farewells to our new Cuban and US friends. This was a unique trip to a unique country, which has not changed in fifty(50) years. I will always remember the beauty of the country and it's people.

By Alex Strashinsky



The Bat Boys



Friendly People

MONMOUTH COUNTY SENIOR LEAGUE

During 2009 season in Monmouth County, the B Division saw the third place team from St. Leo's march thru the playoffs, defeating the first year team The Rebels, 2 games to 0 in the semi's, and then over-powering the regular season League Champs Gallo's, Bears, 2 games to 0. In the A Division Higgins of Freehold rolled to 1st place and then won the playoffs over 507 Main Street (Wall), 2 games to 0.

After the 2009 season we saw the demise of two teams, the long-standing Rick's Knights of Keansburg, and the relatively newcomer Turning Point, but 2010 welcomed three new teams: Huddys, Shaka, (the combining of Rick's and Turning Point) and Lee's Garage. Jerzy Boys changed their name to Chapin Hill, as did St. Leo's to Amalgamated Aces, and Ocean SilberKnights to Pete &

Elda's. The League now has 12 teams. In a new concept the League did away with their divisions, creating one League where every team will play a home-and-home against all opponents, giving each team 22 games. At the end of the season, Teams finishing 1-4 will playoff (A bracket), Teams 5-8 will playoff (B bracket) and Teams 9-12 will playoff. (C bracket). All playoffs will be 2 out of 3, and the result will be 3 Bracket Champs.

This year it looks as though the Monmouth County Over 60 League will really happen. After 2 attempts over the past 5 years, the League has four teams, Ocean, Neptune, Freehold and Howell, and will play a 9-game schedule, meeting every Monday night from May 17th to the end of July, for doubleheaders at Bert Willis Field in Neptune.

Did You Know?

... That veteran softball player Frank Haviland from Monmouth County and the Jersey Jaguars is a world class track star? He has competed in both indoor and outdoor National Championships in 400m, 800m, 1500m, mile, and 2000m steeplechase. In 2001 he set the American indoor record (65-69 age group) in the 800m. That broke the record that was held for 12 years. That year Frank won four gold medals in the outdoor Nationals in Baton Rouge, LA. He went to the World Championships in Brisbane, Australia running against champions from Canada, Ireland, Germany, Japan, Great Britain and Australia. He had a great race coming in second and breaking the outdoor American record in the 800m(2:24). The previous record was held for 22 years.

He has won 11 National championships in the 65-69 age group. Still holds the American record in the 2000m steeplechase(8:15) for that age group. Frank has run and medaled in the Penn Relays and the Vitalis Meadowlands Invitational.

The 4x400 and 4x800 relay team, which he anchored, broke two world records in those events. In the Huntsman's Senior Games in St. George, Utah he played for Cash 4 College in softball (averaging 1 home run per game) and won 3 gold medals in track. Twice, Haviland has been named by USA Track & Field as NJ Athlete of the Year.

... That the late Al Mills (see related story page 7) a long time player, coach and a cofounder of senior softball in New Jersey holds the New Jersey State High School football record for the longest punt from scrimmage? Playing his high school days at Long Branch High School, Al kicked from his own end zone, the line of scrimmage was the one yard line, and the ball came to rest on the opposing teams 6 yard line. A total distance of 93 official yards. In the 1950 game he "quick kicked" on third down. In those days the punter played a position in the backfield and could kick on any down. Today with all the specialty teams, it would be very unlikely to happen again. That record still stands today.