

WHAT IF: Fidel Castro came to Washington as a Senator?

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By Al Featherston

By all rights, Fidel Castro should have never played professional baseball.

The Cuban pitcher was on track to become a lawyer – with an eye to a political career – when he was snatched off the campus of the University of Havana in 1946 and began his long journey through the farm system of the Washington Senators.

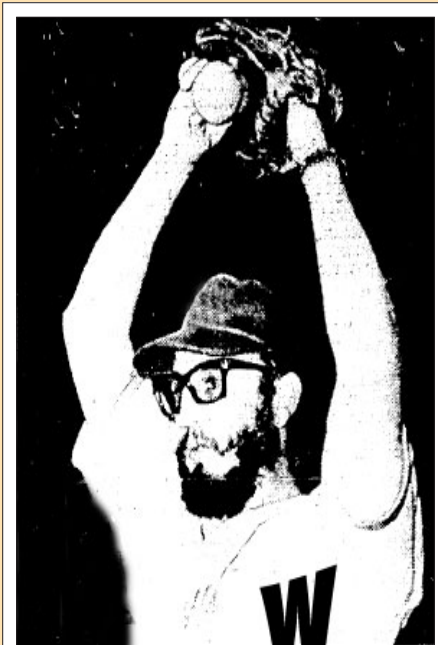
Politics would interrupt his career on several occasions as Castro was deeply invested in the Cuban revolutionary movement. At least one baseball scout suggested that without his frequent political excursions, Castro might have enjoyed a solid major league career – instead of spending most of his career wandering the wastelands of the Washington Senators farm system.

Castro was studying law at the University of Havana when discovered by Clark Griffith's superscout, "Papa Joe" Cambria in the fall of '46. It was really an unlikely discovery – Cambria was in Havana to visit with his old Negro League friend Martin Dihigo and together they took in an intramural baseball game on the University of Havana campus.

Castro, a first-year law student, was pitching for the Law School team against the team from the university's business school. Although he was the 5-4 loser in

Nats Put Down Rally To Edge Orioles, 7-6

Killebrew, Aspromonte, Allison, Sievers Homer;
Castro Quells Oriole Uprising



Fidel Castro, Washington Senators Major League Debut - July 6, 1959

the game, Dihigo pointed out to Cambria that the law school pitcher had displayed a dazzling sinker and that his loss was merely due to his inept infield.

Castro was the illegitimate son of a Spanish migrant. Importantly for Clark Griffith, the young prospect was certified as "100 percent Castilian" – and thus was able to enter organized baseball at a time when only Brooklyn's Branch Rickey was prepared to challenge baseball's color line.

The same rule prevented Griffith from signing another prospect recommended by Cambria – a dark-skinned Cuban third baseman who dropped baseball as a result of Griffith's snub and devoted himself to the revolution – which worked out well for Cuba and the Free World.

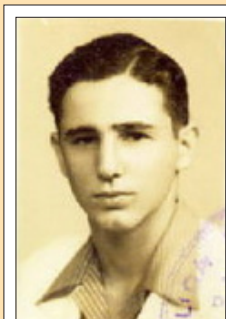
Facing no such obstacles, the Senators signed Castro for a minimum salary and a \$200 bonus (that's why Griffith loved Latin prospects – they were cheap). Castro was sent to the Orlando Senators of the Class D Florida League. The



In 1935, the Washington Senators made Joe Cambria (L) the first scout to cover Latin America, including Cuba. Cambria is pictured here with some of the players he scouted and signed for the Senators including Pedro Ramos, Carlos Paula, Julio Becquer, Camilo Pascual, Gil Hooker and Jose Valdivieso. Castro is not pictured.

21-year-old Castro enjoyed mixed success, mostly as a starter – winning 14 games, losing 14 games and compiling a 3.66 ERA.

That was enough to earn a promotion to the Class C Havana Cubans in the Florida International League. But perhaps distracted by the pleasures of his home city – or maybe by the growing political turbulence of that period, Castro struggled (6-13, 5.88 ERA) in his second pro season.



Fidel Castro, 1943

Fidel Castro [2 of 4]:

He bounced back in 1949, recording a strong season in his first trip to the Class B Charlotte Hornets. Castro would spend the next four seasons at the higher levels of the Senators system. He suffered a slight setback in the spring on 1952, when he returned to Cuba to protest the overthrow of the island's democratic government by former president Fulgencio Batista. He was sentenced to 90 days in jail and missed the first half of the season before rejoining the Senators organization in late June.



General Fulgencio Batista
Time Magazine, April 21, 1952

Politics would again intrude on Castro's career in 1953. The 27-year old righthander was enjoying a breakout season for the Chattanooga Lookouts of the Southern Association (Washington's top farm club). Castro almost certainly would have been called to the majors in August or at least when the rosters expanded in September.

But on July 26, Cuban insurgents launch an unsuccessful attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago. Dozens of rebels were killed and more than 100 captured – including Castro's brother Raul.

Castro immediately left the Lookouts and traveled to Cuba, where he began to campaign for his brother's release. He became so obnoxious to the Batista regime that he was arrested and was facing a sentence of to two years for political activity. But with the help of the Cuban baseball community, Castro was spirited out of the country to the United States.

He returned to Chattanooga and bounced between the Lookouts and Charlotte Hornets for the next four seasons, his big league chance seemingly gone. But early in July, 1959, Castro finally got the call the major leagues.

He joined the Senators in July, reunited with Pedro Ramos, one of his oldest friends from Cuba, along with young Cuban pitcher Camilo Pascual.

Cuba Barracks Fight; Many Reported Dead

His first major league appearance on July 11th came in relief of Pascual. Castro gave up four hits, but just one run in two innings of work, inducing two double-play grounders with the sinker than he happily told reporters was nicknamed "the Santiago hand grenade".

Nats Purchase Contract of Chattanooga's Castro

Cuban hurler to report Tuesday

Seeing the bearded Castro take the mound for the first time, one wag in the press box exclaimed, "Jeez, where'd they get this guy – the House of David?"

Castro would remain the only bearded Major League player of his generation, although in the 21st Century, his hirsute style would become prevalent in the big leagues.

Castro mostly worked relief, especially after he was rocked in his two starts in late July. He pitched reasonably well (0-2, two saves, 3.99 ERA), but it was difficult to accomplish much for the last-place Senators.

That changed in early September, when Castro was dealt to the Chicago White Sox. The Go-Go Sox, battling the Cleveland Indians down the stretch, were looking for help in a bullpen that had been manned all season by two aging righthanders – Turk Lown and Gerry Staley.

Manager Al Lopez still used his two veterans in crucial situations, but he liked having the newly acquired Cuban to eat up in innings in non-crucial

Fidel Castro Year by Year:

Year	Team	League	Level	W-L	Save	ERA	
1947	Orlando Senators	Florida State	D	14-14	3	3.66	
1948	Havana Cubans	Florida International	C	6-13	2	5.88	
1949	Charlotte Hornets	Tri-State	B	10-8	8	3.75	
1949	Charlotte Hornets	Tri-State	B	12-8	6	3.61	
1950	Charlotte Hornets	Tri-State	B	7-3	4	2.89	
	Augusta Tigers	South Atlantic	A	3-4	6	3.90	
1951	Charlotte Hornets	Tri-State	B	8-4	8	3.46	
	Chattanooga Lookouts	Southern	AA	2-2	7	3.50	
1952	Charlotte Hornets	Tri-State	B	6-7	5	4.01	
1953	Chattanooga Lookouts	Southern	AA	9-4	9	2.96	
1954	Charlotte Hornets	South Atlantic	A	11-10	7	3.99	
1955	Chattanooga Lookouts	Southern	AA	3-5	6	4.14	
	Charlotte Hornets	South Atlantic	A	8-5	4	3.28	
1956	Charlotte Hornets	South Atlantic	A	9-11	8	3.79	
1957	Charlotte Hornets	South Atlantic	A	6-1	3	3.10	
	Chattanooga Lookouts	Southern	AA	6-6	9	3.14	
1958	Chattanooga Lookouts	Southern	AA	8-9	10	3.35	
1959	Chattanooga Lookouts	Southern	AA	3-1	17	2.53	
	Washington Senators	AMERICAN	ML	0-2	2	3.99	
	Chicago White Sox	AMERICAN	ML	0-0	0	2.63	
Minor League Totals				13 years	131-115	122	3.89
Major League Totals				1 year	0-2	2	2.97

Fidel Castro [3 of 4]:

situations. That's why Castro didn't get a win, loss or save during his three-week stint in the pennant race, but he did throw 17.1 innings, allowing just five runs – giving Lown and Staley the rest they needed to pitch the White Sox to their first pennant since the 1919 Black Sox.

Unfortunately, because he was acquired after September 1, Castro was not eligible to pitch in the World Series against the Dodgers. But even as that series ended with a 4-2 LA victory, Castro seemed to be well positioned to earn a spot with the defending American League champs in 1960.

However, Cuban politics again intruded in Castro's career. The revolution that he supported for so long finally triumphed on December 1, 1959, when the forces of revolutionary leader Orestes "Minnie" Minoso marched into Havana, sending Batista packing.

Minoso was a promising baseball player in his youth who was denied a chance to play because he was a black Cuban and not "pure Castilian" as was Castro. He gave up baseball and joined the revolution in 1946, when informed that he would not be signed by the Senators because of the color of his skin. Minoso's top lieutenants were Argentine firebrand Che Guevara and Castro's younger brother Raul.

The elder Castro was able to return to Cuba for the first time since his escape from the Batista regime in 1953. When spring training rolled around in March, Castro elected to stay in his native Cuba. The 35-year-old ex-major league pitcher was named (due to his brother's influence) Director of Cuban Baseball Development and manager of the Cuban Sugar Kings of the Class AAA International League.

But after one season in Havana, in which Castro arranged for dozens of young players to sign professional contracts with Major League teams, Minoso's revolutionary government was split by an internal conflict as Guevara tried to engineer a coup by the pro-Communist wing of the revolutionary party.

Castro sided with Minoso's pro-democracy forces in the bitter and bloody fighting that erupted on the streets and Havana and swept across the island nation. Thanks to aid provided

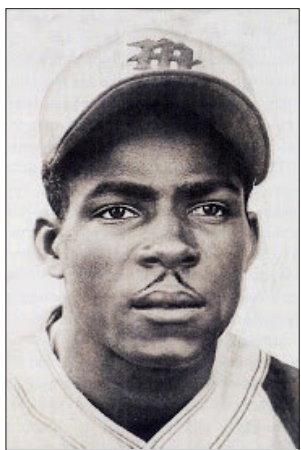
by lame duck American president Dwight D. Eisenhower, Minoso and the pro-democracy forces prevailed. Guevara fled to his native Argentina, where he was assassinated – some say by disappointed Soviet agents, others claim as a victim of the U.S. CIA.

His position secured by the triumph of pro-Democratic forces, Castro became the bearded face of Cuban baseball. He managed the Sugar Kings for most of the next decade. That run ended when Castro was brought in as a co-owner when the National League made its international expansion in 1969, adding teams in Montreal and Havana.

Castro also retained his position as Director of Cuban Baseball development until his retirement in 1990. He was a link between his nation's rich baseball history and Organized Baseball. He was elected to the Cuban Baseball Hall of Fame (as a contributor).

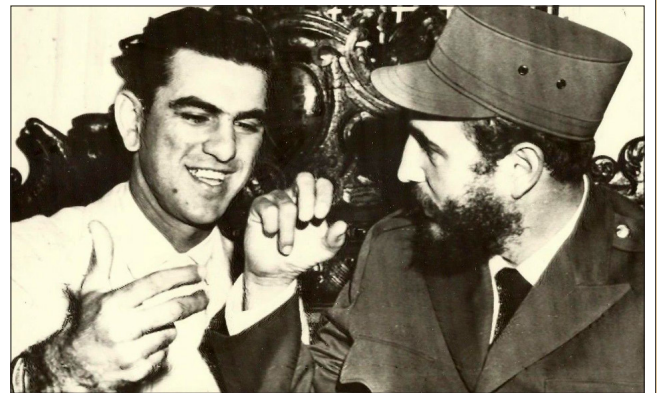
While he was never more than a marginal player himself, many have suggested without his involvement in the Cuban Revolution, he might have become a significant player – at least a solid Major League performer. Castro himself always laughed at such suggestions and claimed that three-term President Minoso, the great hero of Cuban Democracy, was a far greater talent.

That's something we'll never know, although the world got a glimpse of what might have been on July 12, 1966 when Castro's Sugar Kings faced the parent Washington Senators in an exhibition game in Havana Stadium. President Minoso



Orestes "Minnie" Minoso

WASHINGTON, DC: ALTHOUGH HE HAS A BUSY DIPLOMATIC SCHEDULE, DIRECTOR OF CUBAN BASEBALL DEVELOPMENT FIDEL CASTRO TOOK TIME OUT HERE (4/20/60) TO SPEAK WITH FORMER TEAMMATE CAMILO PASCUAL, A RIGHTHANDER WITH THE WASHINGTON SENATORS BASEBALL TEAM. - UPI RADIOPHOTO



Fidel Castro [4 of 4]:

suiting up and played third base, garnering three hits (a double and two singles), while the ageless Castro pitched three scoreless innings of relief.

It was a reminder of the intimate role baseball played – and still plays – in Cuban life.

HISTORICAL NOTE:

Of course, this is fantasy. Despite the myth that Castro was scouted as a baseball prospect in his youth, there is no evidence that he was ever looked at by any team in organized baseball. Yale professor Roberto Gonzales Echevarria, who

wrote the definitive history of Cuban baseball, said the only evidence he's seen that Castro played baseball was a small item in the Havana newspaper on Nov. 28, 1946 that listed "F. Castro" as the losing pitcher for the Havana Law School in an intramural game against the Business School.

There is no evidence that Cambria or any other scout watched that performance. I would point out that the date was just before Castro (by his own admission) shed his "political ignorance". It's not unreasonable to think that if he had been offered a contract in the fall of 1946, he would have taken it – and maybe abandoned the revolution.

But he was never offered anything and history unfolded as it did.

Note (1): The timeline of the Cuban revolution is right with one exception: Havana actually fell to the revolutionaries on Jan. 1, 1959. I delayed the triumph 11 months because I wanted to let my fictional Fidel pitch in a pennant race. Besides, without the charismatic Fidel, the revolution might have taken a little longer. But even without him, I have no doubt the corrupt and inefficient Batista regime would have fallen sooner or later.

Note (2): Orestes "Minnie" Minoso was indeed overlooked because of his dark skin until signed by Bill Veeck in 1948 – when he was 23 years old. He still played 17 seasons in the big leagues and never became a revolutionary. By all reports, Minoso was one of the best people in baseball – and remains an overlooked candidate for the Hall of Fame.

