Yovani Aragon amid his toughest game

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The commissioner of Cuban baseball talked with *Escambray* about strategies, hiring, and projections of our national sports.

None of the games he played for Sancti Spiritus in 16 seasons or with the national team in 1998, when he was Cuba's MVP in the World Championship held in Italy, is being more difficult for Yovani Aragon than the challenge of heading the National Commission of Baseball in Cuba.

Surrounded by a soccer invasion, baseball is bleeding to death among players' defections. International titles vanished. Fans are bored. U-23 tournament does not meet fans' expectations. Some, unhappy, target the tournament held prior to the National Series because players have not been paid a dime for what they did last season. But used to tough moments, the native from Sancti Spiritus threw his slider and wipes the sweat away. *Escambray* follows him play-by-play.

"We are not as bad as they say. We have witnessed a tournament with acceptable technical level. We have witnessed kids motivated and it means health for the sports. Next year, we start over with the U-12 category. It is sort of a guarantee to have this concentration in a single place (EIDE –School for Sports

Initiation) since existing scarce sources can be allocated there.”

But there is lack of gloves, bats, balls, stadiums…

Baseball in Cuba is not safe from the lack of resources our country is experiencing. But we have reached municipalities with balls, bats, and jerseys. We use the money earned by the Federation not only for international tournaments and representing Cuba.

Today people playing baseball are not those who love it, but those who can afford it

We know the economic conditions of some families and baseball kits are expensive. We appreciate trainers, parents, and commissions’ efforts and we suggest all provinces to go to remote places. There are talents in Cuba, we just need to go and find them.

How does the National Commission assess desertion in lower-level categories?

It is a problem. Three or four players remain in Cuba from the teams that won the U-15 World Championship and the U-18 Pan American tournament each. We insist on parents and athletes not to be deceived. Not all of them can reach the Big Leagues. We have seen some of them abandoned in the world. No country in the world gives them the attention and love they get here. Most of those who decide to return are reinstated. They have the option of being hired. Some, like Oscar Luis Cola, Raidel Martinez, and Leandro Urgelles, are very young.

What is the policy with those coming back?

Those who left legally —they had the right and did not renege on their provinces— can play the provincial tournament and then the national series, if call up. If not, those players must wait one year because there is indiscipline. One season is not too much for athletes who abandon their provincial teams amid one tournament. Let’s take into account the sacrifice of trainers who teach athletes until they have 18-19 years old and then defect.

Are Japan and Canada the only options?

The Can-Am league is not the Major Leagues, or the Japanese League. But it has very good level with former big leaguers and other players who played AA and AAA. Cuba’s U-18 team will train in Quebec for the world championship. There are other events like the one in Rotterdam, the Cuba-USA friendly match, and the U-15 Pan American competition. Japan has increased its hiring and we have some in Italy. These are the options.

Do you agree Cuba should learn more about signings?

We have been dealing with signings three or four years now and we have done it with already experienced leagues. There are lots of clauses, legal issues that we must learn. We are training personnel so that every contract may be stronger. We are doing good business. We insert protective sections. Therefore, we are not far from the right path.

Any lights on the possibility of playing in Latin American leagues? Where are we in the talks with the Big Leagues?

Caribbean leagues or other leagues related to the MLB cannot hire any Cuban player due to the US blockade. We are still talking with the MLB. Perhaps we are not making great strides, but certain agreements are in place with mutual respect and interests.

Our stance is the same: Cuban players should be able to play that baseball and then return to our country like Mexicans, Venezuelans, and Japanese…Now, those who betrayed our country in any international event cannot represent Cuba yet.

Signings are good but hurt the National Series

We cannot be isolated. The signings are opportunities and most of the time they are positive. Most of them return and play the second stage of the postseason. The National Series will be always played with 16 teams. And there will be a time to group the quality. Cuba is baseball. Do you see a province without a baseball team?

Is it the U-23 tournament the sort of baseball the Cuban Baseball Commission aspires?

The fans are following it with other perspective. But we should understand that this is a tournament for player development.

Do you agree that baseball in Cuba is not in its prime?

No, I say it again: I do not think we are that bad as many believe we are. We played the World Baseball Classic where teams like South Korea and Venezuela —better placed in the world ranking and with big leaguers in their rosters— could not advanced. And we did it with Cuban-born players. It is true there are problems. But we do achieve things and we praise the work of trainers and workers. We are an athlete-producer machine.

But almost all stadiums remain empty, except in the postseason. Day games are hurting baseball players.

The most important thing is that we must demand more efforts from players. It is not about baseball kits or fields. Regarding the game time, we decided to unify the

time. However, we are open to allow that provinces can change the time according to their needs. We are planning to change the lights in stadiums.

There are small sample of 90+ pitchers. How do you go to Japan?

Strategies, signings, young players, everything prepares us to face this new cycle to look for the qualification ticket in the Pan American Games. Japan is our goal. We have 90+ pitchers in the U-23 tournament. We are projecting a national pitching school to achieve a more specialized work.

To some, the Commission has lost credibility and authority

I do not know anything about such opinion. The Commission is working hard. Not all you read on social media is true. Everyone has his/her own opinions, and we are open to talk and help Cuban baseball.

Is this your toughest game?

This is a tough one. But we are trying to do the same we did in crucial games: to get opponents out with everyone’s help. I trust we can win this game.

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