Cuba overflowing with talent despite defections

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There's not much Roberto Pacheco has not seen during his five decades in the radio booth calling baseball and boxing for Cuba.

He has been to five Olympics, countless international tournaments and all four World Baseball Classic tournaments.

He's one of the most famous figures on the island, the eyes and voice of the Cuban people.

"With the internet, people can hear me all over, not just [in] Cuba," Pacheco, 76, said in Spanish. "It's such a great pleasure to be able to share the game with all of the passionate fans we have. Baseball is life in Cuba, so to have this job is honor."

The baseball landscape continues to evolve in Cuba, but a few things remain the same: The Cuban team enters every international tournament confident it's going to win it, and Pacheco is there to call the games. The confident team from the province of Granma won its first game of the Caribbean Series on Friday, and the island's famous radio broadcaster was delighted to send the news back home.

"Good game, right?" Pacheco said after Cuba's 6-4 victory over Venezuela. "I told

you we can play." Cuba later improved to 2-0 in the tournament with its 5-4 win over Mexico late Saturday night.

The bearer of mostly good -- and sometimes bad -- news, Pacheco still believes Cuba's Serie Nacional, the island's top league, and the national team is a force on the international baseball scene despite the defections that have depleted its rosters in recent years.

"Players leaving Cuba was not good for us," Pacheco said. "But we have talent, and we should be respected. The players might be young, but we still have good players."

Supporters of Cuban baseball point to the island's success in international tournaments in the 23-and-under category and younger. There's also the belief that outfielders Yoelqui Cespedes, younger brother of Yoenis, and Victor Victor Mesa could be the face of Cuban baseball in the future.

Additionally, there are signs that young pitchers Yariel Rodriguez, Yosimar Cousin, Yosver Zulueta, Javier Mirabel and Pablo Guillen will eventually become leaders on the mound. Infielders Norel Gonzalez, Yolbert Sanchez and Ariel Martinez could also develop into national-team stars.

"I do think baseball in Cuba is advancing," veteran Cuban outfielder Alfredo Despaigne said in Spanish. "We are getting there little by little. We have a lot of young players who want to play, and we hope they stay that way, but we have lost a lot who have left the country."

In the short term, Cuba is focused on winning its ninth Caribbean Series title. The team has 17 members of its most recent World Baseball Classic team in Mexico, but it will still have overcome some uneven play in recent years.

In 2014, Villa Clara became the first team from Cuba to participate in the Caribbean Series since 1960, and it was eliminated in four games. The next year, the team from Pinar del Rio won the title. Cuba was eliminated in the semifinals in 2016 and finished with a 3-2 record last year.

"We have a chance to be great again," Pacheco said. "But that's only if the players don't leave."