Cuba wins in extras, still in play for Premier12 super round

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Starter Bladimir Banos couldn't get an out, but reliever Lazaro Blanco got Cuba out of a first-inning bases-loaded jam. NPB star Yurisbel Gracial won it in the bottom of the tenth with a sacrifice fly.

No. 5 ranked Cuba defeated no. 7 ranked Australia, 3-2 after 10 innings and kept its hopes to advance to the WBSC Premier12 Super Round intact. Livan Moinelo earned the win. He pitched two perfect innings, highlighting a brilliant effort by Cuba’s bullpen.

Starter Bladimir Banos couldn’t get an out in the top of the first. He gave up back to back singles to right fielder Tim Kennelly and left fielder Andrew Campbell, then walked the bases loaded.

Cuba’s manager Miguel Borroto wasted no time in giving the call to the bullpen.
“Everybody on the pitching staff knew that they were going to have only two chances,” said Borroto.

“Banos actually had three. It was simply not his day. We had to win this game at all costs, I have to think about the team, not the single-player.”

Veteran right-hander Lazaro Blanco proved his manager right. He needed only three pitches to strike out designated hitter Mitch Nilsson. Aussie center fielder Aaron Whitefield hit a fly to shallow right field for the second out. Yurisbel Gracial completed the inning-ending double play

with a perfect throw home. Catcher Yosvani Alarcon had plenty of time to tag Tim Kennelly out.

“We missed a huge opportunity in the first,” commented Australia’s manager David Nilsson.

“We need to be better at-bat if we want to make it to the next level on the international stage. This is a very good team, but my players need to learn how to swing the bat with runners in scoring position.”

The game went into the extra innings tied at two. Cuba’s shortstop Erisbel Arruebarrena thought he had won it when he sent a deep fly to dead center with two outs in the bottom of the ninth. Aaron Whitefield kept Australia alive with a superb running catch off the wall.

Australia failed to score in the top of the tenth despite the international tie-break rule, that sets runners at second and first with none out.

Cuba’s center fielder Ruel Santos bunted and advanced the tie-break runners. Catcher Yosvani Alarcon reached third beating the throw by first baseman David Sutherland and Arruebarrena reached second. Pinch hitter William Saavedra was the first out on a fly to shallow-left field. Right fielder Yurisbel Gracial looked at two balls and then lined out to center. His fly was deep enough for Alarcon to score from third and win the game.

“It was a very important at-bat,” commented Gracial, who was named the MVP of the game.

“Also Alarcon ran the bases very well in the tenth inning. Thank God we could both come up for Cuba.”

Gracial is a 28-home run hitter for the NPB Fukuoka Softbank Hawks and has had a very long season.

“It’s true, it was a very long season," said Gracial on a final note. There’s no time to rest though. We need to take Cuba as far as possible in this Premier12.”