
A snapshot of four greats

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As is almost always the case in baseball, nothing happens by chance, and true to form, four of the favorite teams predicted to reach the semifinals of the 55th National Series, have done so. Two rank as historic greats having won the tournament on numerous occasions: Industriales and the Vegueros from Pinar del Río. The two other teams, current champions Ciego de Ávila's Tigres and Cocodrilos de Matanzas have gained this classification given their outstanding performances over the last five years.

The four semifinalists will take a break until March 25, while the tournament is briefly suspended owing to a visit by Major League Baseball team the Tampa Bay Rays, scheduled to play a friendly game against the Cuban national team in the recently renovated Latinoamericano Stadium, the country's largest, with a capacity of over 40,000.

Thus a brief review of the contenders is in order, looking back over their general performance in the three key areas of baseball – batting, pitching and fielding – after over 80 games played since August 29, 2015. They are listed below in the order they qualified.

COCODRILOS DE MATANZAS

The team finished seventh in the qualifying stages with many writing them off as possible contenders for the title. But the quarter finals of the tournament – with eight teams reinforced with players from the eight eliminated squads – saw the Cocodrilos surpass all others, finishing with 28 wins and 10 defeats, and now ranked top going into the semifinals.

Their batting and pitching record is fairly balanced. With the second highest batting average (299) they have a good mix of speed (54 stolen bases) and power (71 home runs), also second in this category. They likewise rank second in Earned Run Average (ERA) with 3.38, offset against their rivals' total batting average of 250. Meanwhile the team has achieved a satisfactory 474 hits with a walk rate of 240, bearing in mind pitchers' generally poor control seen in this edition of the National Series.

The Leones de Industriales have the best offense in the tournament. Número 183845. Photo: Ricardo López Hevia

Featuring among the most outstanding players on the team is third baseman Yurisbel Gracial, a hard hitter with 15 home runs, 21 doubles, 61 batted-in-runs and 326 hits, fourth in the regular line-up and a decisive to loaded base plays (nine of his home runs have been made with bases loaded). In the pitchers box, reinforcement Freddy Asiel Álvarez from Villa Clara, is the Cocodrilos' trump card, with eight wins, only two loses and the best ERA (1.47), who together with Jonder Martínez (12-4) and left hander Yoanni Yera, (11-6) make a stellar trio.

TIGRES DE CIEGO DE ÁVILA

A province that formerly no one rated, the Tigres de Ciego de Avila had the talent but lacked the momentum, which finally arrived in the 51st Series and then again last year – thus winning the National competition on two occasions in a relatively short space of time. This year they qualified second, after finishing top of the play offs but suffering a slump after losing seven consecutive games in the quarter finals.

Surprisingly, Roger Machado's Tigres lead the home runs ranking with a score of 73, and place second in runs-scored with 487. The team ranks third in ERA (3.62) with starting pitchers securing 32 wins and relievers, 21.

The Tigres are currently considered to be the most well-rounded Cuban baseball team, although this year their defensive runs saved average of 974, isn't quite as good as that seen in previous seasons. The team's key player is 22 year old rising star José Adolis García, a right fielder, fast on bases, with a powerful arm, 316 hits, 14 home runs and has accumulated the most runs-batted-in of the tournament, with 69.

In addition to José Adolis García, veteran member of the national squad, shortstop Yorbis Borroto also stands out, who at 30 years old is currently playing his best season, with 358 hits, 61 runs-scored, 26 doubles, and is one of the top scorers in both categories. The team has a crucial figure on the mound, right handed Vladimir García, with 11 wins and three loses and an excellent ERA of 2.18; while Dachel Duquesne and closer Yennier Cano also constitute two of the team's other key players.

VEGUEROS DE PINAR DEL RÍO

Historic winners of the National Series and first Cuban team to claim the Caribbean Series title since 1961, after triumphing in 2015. One of squad's strong points –led by Coach Ricardo Gallardo - is its pitching which offsets its fairly weak offense.

The Vegueros are the team with the largest number of star openers, four in total; all of whom have featured in the national selection: Yosvani Torres, Vladimir Baños, Erlis Casanova and Yaifredo Domínguez, who altogether are responsible for 30 of the team's victories. To this group must be added Liván Moinelo, currently the best left-handed closer in the tournament with a record of six wins, 14 saves, 71 strike-outs and 72 innings.

The team's offense is relatively weak as the squad with the least runs-scored (381), lowest average (280) and a poor batting record with only 53 home runs. However, the four semifinalist teams have the right to select three extra reserves from the other four eliminated teams, which could see the Vegueros gain some strong batters to complement their effective pitchers, in particular first baseman and fourth in the line-up William Saavedra, the teams top pitcher with an ERA of 3.36, 13 home runs and 62 runs batted in, among the best in the tournament.

INDUSTRIALES

The most charismatic team in the history of the National Series, and most frequent winner with 12 titles. The Leones' last victory came in the 49th Series and as such their demanding fanbase, which extends outside of the capital, is imploring the team to end five years of waiting. This is the difficult task facing their new coach, Javier Méndez.

The Blues as they are also known, have the most successful batting record in the tournament, leading with an average of over 300, within two runs of the 500 runs-scored mark, best in the league in slugging, doubles, and hits with bases loaded, in addition to 33 home runs with at least one runner on base.

The squad's main problem lies in their pitching, especially the openers, who have secured 25 wins and 23 loses, with an ERA of 4.66 while relief pitchers score better with 26-12 and 3.13. Three veterans - Frank Montith,

Norberto González and Noelvis Entenza – have opened 41 games and won 16. Reliever Norberto from Cienfuegos only secured two wins for the team in the quarter finals. The most effective of the relief pitchers has been Héctor Ponce with four wins, 14 saves and a ERA of 2.79.

In regards to batters, right fielder Stayler Hernández stands out, currently playing his best season with 342 hits, and top scorer in five offensive categories, including base hits, with 115. Another noteworthy player is catcher Frank Camilo Morejón — with the top batting stats in the tournament — who has scored over 300 hits and 41 runs-batted-in.

These are – briefly summarized – the credentials of the four teams hoping to win this year's title, however it is difficult to pick a favorite. For example in 2015, Matanzas – who led the tournament almost throughout - faced off against underdogs the Isle of Youth. The majority of experts and fans predicted Matanzas would win... however the team ended up being knocked out after losing six games. Baseball is unpredictable, and even more so in a short season such as this.
