

Grand Finale: The winning run...

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In the best Final Series of Cuban baseball since 2010, Granma Horses repeated –against all predictions– for the second year in a row the most coveted title of the island’s sports, after defeating Las Tunas Lumberjacks 3-2 in the decisive 7th clash.

Led by the outstanding start of Villa Clara’s reinforcement Alain Sanchez, who walked eight scoreless innings to clinch his fourth win in the postseason, the troop of Carlos Marti knew how to succeed in a complicated final clash and scored from the very first inning by Carlos Benitez’s hit to right field.

In that inning, the defense of Las Tunas contributed with the rival scoring, since they were unable to make a double play on a strong ground ball to shortstop by Aviles, because it took Paumier too long to catch the ball on second base, thus allowing Manduley reach it safely. You cannot give chances to your rivals in this kind of games, because your chances of success vanish.

The second run was scored in the 5th, thanks to singles by Cespedes and Santos, with sacrifice fly by Yordan Manduley, meanwhile, the crucial third run came an inning later on a double by Despaigne, another hit by Benítez, a walk to Cedeño

and a driving fly by Raul Gonzalez. Here, Alarcon did not hold Quiala's difficult throw, which could throw Despaigne out.

The rest was a collection of scoreless innings by left-hander Alain Sanchez until the 9th, when the Lumberjacks brought out their axe as they have done throughout the postseason and put the tie on first base with one out, leaned on a single by Larduet, a double by Johnson –which ousted Sanchez from the mound– and a driving hit by Yosvani Alarcon vs. reliever Raidel Martinez.

However, Alarcon, the most complete baseballer of the squad, succumbed to pressure and was caught by surprise to shatter the hopes of thousands of people from Las Tunas. They courageously managed to bat two more hits with two outs, but Viñales could not become a hero and made out 27 flying out to right fielder Yoelkys Cespedes to unleash the winning ride of the Horses.

Las Tunas keeps the sadness of having the championship as close as two lovers, but baseball is both unpredictable and mysterious. They were the romantic squad of the tournament, which never gave up and sold its defeat dearly. The one that won 59 clashes, more than any other team from Las Tunas in National Series, and defeated –coming from behind three times– reborn Industriales in semifinals.

Unforgettable support from their public, who crowded Julio Antonio Mella stadium in all playoff games and turned the city into a wild baseball square. Neither the rain nor the endless wait mattered, but the unconditional love for the jersey of the province and the players who were defending it with honor.

What to say about Danel Castro, the batting giant and extraordinary warrior. He batted against Industriales as he pleased and at the right moment, but vs. Granma he booked a ticket toward immortality by hitting one of the most exciting home runs in the history of that sport in Cuba.

Others who stood out too were Ayala, Larduet, Quiala, Jose Angel, Yudiel, Viñales, Paumier, Luis Angel, Leonys, Meneses, Yoelkys, Granados, who indistinctively contributed to achieve the best performance of the territory in baseball classics on the island. The acknowledgement of all fans and the specialized press for Pablo Civil, experienced general coach Edesio Perez and the rest of the technical staff.

Greater congratulations should also go to Granma Horses for retaining the crown. They have demonstrated it is not necessary to win more than 60 games to climb the mountain, but to do things correctly in that stage and to avoid losing the focus. Several years ago, it would seem utopian to think about winning two championships, but it is a wonderful reality in 2018.

One can question some of Carlos Marti's decisions; however, he is an old wolf in

team management and knows pretty well how to motivate his players. His master play lied in sliding Despaigne over to left field and to open space for Cedeño as designated hitter. Equally, it was pretty intelligent to place talented Yoelkys Cespedes in the right field for the 7th game.

Once again, Carlos Benitez played a very important role at the moment of driving runs, Roel Santos stood out in the center field and as leadoff hitter, Yordan Manduley made fantasies in the shortstop, Guillermo Aviles became a star with his home runs and Yulexis La Rosa fulfilled his task behind the plate.

In the pitching staff a man, named Alain Sanchez, led the team from his arm. This reinforcement from Villa Clara won that decisive 2nd clash vs. Matanzas as reliever and then managed to achieve 3 wins as starter. Undoubtedly, he was the key factor for the victory in these playoffs.

The admirable thing is that a guy like Alfredo Despaigne with an over US\$13 million contract in Japan, plus incentives, devotes himself the way he did in another finale for his province.

The star: First baseman Guillermo Aviles showed credentials as the best hitter in Cuban baseball at present by launching four home runs in this stage.

The positive thing: Camagüey's reinforcement, Yariel Rodríguez (LTU), allowed Granma's 3 runs, but despite picking the painful defeat, is still prospect #1 in Cuban pitching. He only needs to improve his pitching command and dominate the strike zone.

The surprise: Raul Gonzalez batted in 15 runs in this stage to lead this department and added 3 homers, after a disappointing second half with Pinar del Rio. He was one of the key pieces of Granma's victory.

The MVP: Villa Clara's Alain Sanchez won 4 out of Granma's 8 postseason games, thus achieving the third championship of his career.

Translated by Jorge Mesa Benjamin / CubaSi Translation Staff
