
Juan Castro: A Painful Farewell Behind the Home Plate

By: Harold Iglesias Manresa / CubaSi
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It was year 1986. For those chances of life, I'd dare say that I was privileged with a true work of art at the Latinoamericano Stadium.

Believe me, that crucial baseball game between Industriales and Vegueros it was for me like an adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, the best version of Giselle, or like watching the Godfather trilogy.

Also, having the pleasure that your grandfather introduces you to the world of baseball and on top of everything else, above home team dugout, feeling the swarm of frenzied fans, witnessing the outburst and avalanche after Agustín Marquetti hit the homer against pitcher Rogelio García, anyway ...

Life has hit me hard this week. In less than three days my heart has been shaken a couple of times. My eyes have been filled with tears when I learned of the death of two sport athletes: the eternal professor Elio Menéndez from his hard words like Stevenson's hook or the crossing of the finish line of Pipián Martínez after a challenging stage; and now the painful farewell behind the home plate of Juan Castro, at age 66 and victim of cancer.

He was one of the stars of that spectacular baseball game of 1986. A man with an impressive build, slow cadence but accurate steps, and silk hands, especially the hand with the glove when catching balls and rubbing the seams behind the home plate.

I didn't have the chance to watch Juan Castro play a lot, either with Vegueros team or with the Cuba team. Imagine I was barely 5 years old in 1986, when that game marked my later almost wild attraction to baseball. Juan, like Marquetti and Rogelio García from the mound, had an important weight in that later inclination.

Going back to the "Tractor de San Cristóbal", a nickname given to Juan, let's just mention that he was the best catcher our baseball championship has ever had.

Excellent catchers have performed in Cuban baseball: Alberto Martínez, Pedro Medina, Juan Manrique, Ariel Pestano, Rolando Meriño, Roger Machado, Frank Camilo Morejón... All with peculiar characteristics, but in the case of Juan, that confidence and elegance behind home plate, that impenetrable wall he became for balls, and the wits he had against opposing hitters and game situations, gave him a special touch.

It was a touch that also had a big heart, a wisdom that materialized over the years, and a transparency I have seen in few players. His way of speaking, as slow as the cadence of his walking, but with full meaning behind every word like he did with his pitching in the strike zone.

The last recollection I have of him, goes back to the All-Star Game held in Pinar del Río in 2017. There, I not only had the huge pleasure of watching him sharing with players from various generations as part of the game of veterans, but we also had a talk on the side about the situation of catchers in the teams of the National Series and the preselection of the Cuba team, as well as the position in the international Cuba team.

Juan, with a look as sharp as his thoughts, offered me some reflections that later served to expand my vision on how essential it is to have a good catcher calling the plays in a baseball game, as well as to improve my analytical skills on several matters.

And simple as that, from the visiting dugout at Captain San Luis Stadium, Juan was a star once again. Not calling signs this time, catching an extremely difficult pitch, or requesting the best pitch of Rogelio or Julio Romero.

He did it talking, with the joy of his love for baseball and many years of experience on that encrypted path. Sharing his views without prejudice or middle terms.

That is the last image I have of Juan, wishing to wear the shin guards and mask and be aware of every situation of the match, even if it's an All-Star Game. The image of regretting not hitting more with the Vegueros and Cuba team, the image of humility wearing green and white, with a slow but sure steps. The image of that catcher every pitcher would want behind the home plate, that of the elegant symphony with his left hand that afternoon in 1986.

About him, thanks to colleague Angélica Arce Montero, Rogelio García and José Manuel Cortina would say:

Rogelio: "... Always and I mean always you will be my favorite catcher, the best in the world. The only one who told me in tough moments, pitch whatever you like, I'm right here ... "

Cortina: "... Every day I am more convinced that life is, but a breath, nothing. A doubt, a mercy, a gust of absence thrown across the floor.

We have lost the friend, the companion, the player. We have lost the most accurate left hand in Cuban baseball. Our sport is in mourning ...

I have written these lines with great pain. Two hard blows in a very short time seem almost like a technical knockout. Elio Menéndez and Juan Castro have reached that place in the sky, set aside for the stars of Cuban sports. Along with Stevenson, Ramón Fonst, Rafael Fortún, José Llanuza ... and many others. They set the bar higher every day.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSí Translation Staff
