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Cuba's female baseball umpire breaks barriers

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In the macho world of Cuban baseball, Yanet Moreno has always played with the boys.

As a child, she was the only girl to play street baseball in her neighborhood. The boys would fight to get her on their team, and her father feared she would become a tomboy.

Today, at 39, she is the only woman in the world umpiring top-flight professional baseball. She is in her 11th season in the National Series, Cuba's premier baseball league, and says she is ready for the international stage.

"One always dreams of more, no? I want a little bit more," Moreno said, naming the Central American Games, Pan American Games and the World Baseball Classic as tournaments she wants to work.

"I don't think it's out of reach," she said of the Classic, where the best players in the world compete for their countries every four years. "If I work a little bit harder, I could do it."

She is no longer considered an oddity in Cuban baseball and fan reaction has diminished. She projects a steely calm on the field, her gaze covered with sunglasses.

There are few female umpires working in men's baseball around the world.

Venezuelan Maite Bullones has umpired in her country's minor leagues and is set this week to become the first woman to work an international men's tournament at a 21-and-under Baseball World Cup in Taiwan, but she has still not worked in the Venezuelan Professional Baseball League.

In the US, no woman has ever broken into Major League Baseball, and no woman has umpired in the US minor leagues since 2008.

Cuba has yet to offer Moreno one of its umpiring spots in a top international event for men.

She might be nominated to work a tournament for male players 15 and younger next year and given the chance to work up to higher levels of competition, said Luis Daniel Del Risco, head of rules and umpiring for the Cuban Baseball Federation.

Until now, though, Del Risco said Moreno has yet to earn an elite international assignment, explaining that Cuba is normally allotted one or two umpires for such tournaments and Moreno is ranked about 15th or 16th by quality out of 42 umpires in the National Series.

However, he also cited tradition as a reason for holding her back.

"It's not customary for women to work in men's tournaments, and the proposal hasn't been made," Del Risco said.

The comment upset retired Cuban journalist Julita Osendi, who broke barriers as the first female reporter to cover Cuban baseball.

"What isn't customary is the stupid machismo in this country," she said. "For me, she [Moreno] is good enough to umpire any level of baseball."

Moreno said she has only once heard a sexist remark from someone on the field, a manager who remarked on the size of her buttocks while throwing in a racial comment and a vulgarity. She promptly threw him out of the game.

Moreno's colleagues say she is qualified and support her quest to umpire outside Cuba.

"She's prepared. Disciplined. She is ready for any level of baseball," said Antonio Reyes, head of the four-person umpiring team that Moreno travels with across Cuba. "I would vote for her."

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