

What the shift in U.S.-Cuba relations means for baseball

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Considering the full scope of U.S.-Cuba relations — with countless lives altered and lost on account of a half-century stalemate — it seems trivial to discuss baseball in light of Wednesday’s historic events.

Yet, the impact of the political shift on Major League Baseball is — and should be — part of the conversation. After all, President Obama mentioned the athletic contributions of Cuban exiles early in Wednesday’s address. And after more than 50 years of mutual isolation, baseball is perhaps the greatest cultural touchstone between the countries — and a natural venue for what could be the start of radical change.

The key words there are *could be*, because — on many levels — it’s difficult to say precisely how MLB’s relationship with Cuba is different today than it was yesterday.

Two hours after the President began his remarks, the commissioner’s office released the following statement:

“Major League Baseball is closely monitoring the White House’s announcement regarding Cuban-American relations. While there are not sufficient details to make a realistic evaluation, we will continue to track this significant issue, and we will keep our Clubs informed if this different direction may impact the manner in which they conduct business on issues related to Cuba.”

First and foremost, even as the nations announced a move toward “full diplomatic relations,” the U.S. economic embargo remains in legislative effect. Given that Republicans tend to support the embargo and are about to formally control both houses of Congress, the embargo is unlikely to go away anytime soon.

Still, Wednesday’s announcement increases the chances for a new working agreement among the respective federal governments, MLB, and Cuba’s baseball federation. That could mean any of the following:

- The unsavory and life-threatening methods by which Cuban players leave the island — a process that often involves payoffs to human smugglers — have the potential to change, if freedom of economic movement is codified as part of the larger agreement. But those details likely must wait until particulars of the agreement are established through the U.S. State Department’s conversations with their Cuban counterparts.
- The Cuban government may allow Cuban MLB players to represent their homeland at international events (like the World Baseball Classic) and/or participate in Cuba’s domestic winter league, known as *Serie Nacional*. MLB players from the Dominican Republic and Venezuela generally have those rights, although MLB clubs often (explicitly or implicitly) prohibit their highest-paid stars from playing winter ball because of injury risks.

So, although it’s unlikely that stars like Jose Abreu and Yasiel Puig will return to their *Serie Nacional* teams each winter, the Cuban baseball federation could welcome them back to the national team.

- MLB teams may play exhibition games — or perhaps even regular-season series — in Cuba. MLB and the NBA have hosted preseason games in China during recent years, which is clear evidence that U.S. pro sports leagues can build their brands within a Communist country. (Of note, the [Baltimore Orioles](#) played an exhibition in Havana against a Cuban all-star team in 1999.)

That’s the first tier of reasonable change, which could occur through a series of exemptions even if the embargo remains in place. It’s harder to envision all 30 major-league teams opening up academies in Cuba in the very near future, as they have in the Dominican Republic.

“I don’t think that will happen,” Cuban baseball expert Peter Bjarkman told FOX Sports, when asked about the possibility of MLB team academies on the island. “Normalizing relations means things like travel restrictions. I don’t see Cuba giving up its economic system or opening the door to exploitation by foreign corporations. It [the Cuban government] will still want 60 percent ownership on foreign (corporations) and complete control over its own athletes.

“The near (term) future baseball relationships will be with Japan. I don’t think Cuba is ready to hand over its baseball to MLB.”

Even if the Cuban government allowed U.S. sports franchises that level of autonomy, MLB clubs would want to see if an international draft is instituted under the next collective bargaining agreement before making infrastructure investments. The notion of a MLB-affiliated franchise in Cuba, which last occurred in 1960 with the Havana Sugar Kings of the Triple-A International

League, is undoubtedly many years and political concessions away . . . but suddenly plausible, on a momentous day for the nation and national pastime.

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