
World Cup 2014: Our man in Havana begs Cubans to support England

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Two weeks before the planet's biggest footballing event kicks off in Brazil, Our Man in Havana has made an extraordinary call to the Cuban people to support England in the World Cup.

As Roy Hodgson's team prepare for Friday's friendly against Peru, Tim Cole, the UK Ambassador to Cuba, has implored fans on the island to get behind England – saying “we're really not that good”.

Mr Cole writes a regular blog on the Foreign Office website, in both Spanish and English. His latest, available [here](#), is headlined “Cuba, England needs you!”. He reminds Cubans that on the only occasion when their team made it to the finals, in France in 1938, “They beat Romania in the first round and then lost heavily to Sweden (8-0 – ouch!) in the second round”.

While Cuba excels in many sports, punching well above its weight on the international stage, football is a minority interest. Cubans' first love is baseball, closely followed by volleyball.

The island's football team lost the first five of their qualifying matches for the World Cup, scraping a 1-1 draw at home to Panama in the final game. Cuba is ranked 90th in the world by FIFA, six places below Northern Ireland and 79 behind England.

The ambassador's appeal is based on fraternal interests, with a nod towards the Castro regime: “Like Cuba today, the England team is racially diverse with an emphasis on youth. Also, just as in Cuba, the manager has years of experience and the team is built around a strong defence.” But Mr Cole then confesses: “England really needs all the help we can get. We've got a tough group with Uruguay, Italy and Costa Rica. We're perennial underachievers in the World Cup, having won it only once in 1966. And we're really not that good. So, please Cuba, support us!”

In his blog, the ambassador runs through the other possible contenders for the support of neutral Cubans,

dismissing the prospect that the USA might benefit: "I'm not sure many Cubans, even those living in Florida, will support the United States team – they've got a tough group with matches against Germany, Portugal and Ghana so I suspect they'll be going home early."

The Football Association declined to comment on the ambassador's appeal.

Annerys Hockley, a London-based Cuban who works for the specialist travel firm, Journey Latin America, said: "Sadly the majority of Cubans are unlikely to support England during the World Cup. I expect most Cubans will back one of the big Latin American teams such as Mexico or Brazil because of their Latino similarities."

So why should Cubans support England?

"The only team it really makes sense for Cubans to support is England. Here's why. The first very good reason is that the British introduced football to Cuba. Not in 1762 when we occupied Havana for 11 months but in the early 1900s when Brits with names like Forrester and Campbell were living here. The first two Cuban teams set up were SC Hatuey and Rovers AC and the first official match between them took place on 11 December 1911 at the Campo de Palatino in Cerro. Rovers won 1-0 with a very British-sounding Jack Orrs scoring the winning goal.

"The year before, according to Cuban football historians, SC Hatuey played a match against sailors from a visiting British boat. The sailors lost rather badly – also 8-0 – so I suspect they had already had a chance to sample some good Cuban rum.

"A second reason for Cubans to support us is that football was invented in England. At least that's what we English like to think. Actually football-type games were played in Ancient Greece, Rome, China, Japan and probably by the Tainos long before we English started playing it. But the codification of the game – the rules etc – were established in England in the middle of the 19th century so I think we can lay claim to being the inventors of the modern game as we know it."
