
Cuban Baseball Stars Excited about Opening of Direct Route to Big Leagues

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Speaking to reporters at a practice ahead of a March 22 game at Havana's Estadio Latinoamericano between the Cuban national team and the MLB's Tampa Bay Rays that U.S. President Barack Obama will attend as part of his historic three-day visit to the Communist-ruled island, they said Cuba had much to offer professional baseball in the United States.

"This opening is what we were waiting for, so athletes won't have to defect or renounce their nationality," the 48-year-old Linares, regarded as one of Cuba's best-ever players, told reporters.

He said the game against the Rays – the first since full bilateral relations were formally restored last July – "is of great benefit" to Cuba and "especially its players," adding that "as they get to play more they'll gradually feel more confidence and a greater desire to one day reach that level."

"It's very good, especially so they don't keep taking players away from us," the 56-year-old Mesa, who was chosen to manage the national team in the game against the Rays, said.

He added that he was looking forward to "shaking Obama's hand" and posing for a photo with the U.S. president.

Asked about Cuban players' potential and the interest they may generate from big-league clubs, 42-year-old Pedro Luis Lazo, regarded as the greatest pitcher in the island's history, said "90 percent of Cuban players can play in the big leagues ... the opportunity just has to come."

Morejon, a catcher for Havana club Industriales, said that like "everyone who plays baseball all over the world" he would like to try his luck in the "strongest league."

"I think Cubans have that right, and above all that desire, and I think many of us who are there and are doing well have shown that," he said, alluding to standout players such as Chicago White Sox first baseman Jose Abreu.

The U.S. government on Tuesday unveiled a new package of measures to ease the 54-year-old embargo, which the Obama administration has unsuccessfully pushed for the Republican-controlled Congress to completely lift.

Among other things, Cubans – athletes or artists, for example – who obtain a non-immigrant visa for a trip to the United States will be able to earn a salary or compensation during their stay, while U.S. companies will be able to directly sponsor or hire citizens of the Caribbean island.

Several Cuban-born stars, including Abreu and Los Angeles Dodgers standout Yasiel Puig, currently play in the big leagues, but they had to defect from the island, sometimes embark on dangerous journeys to reach foreign soil and establish prior residency in a third country.
