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BASEBALL CULTURES CELEBRATE IN LOS ANGELES

AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill

Fans cheer in the first inning of the final of the World Baseball Classic between the United States and Puerto Rico in Los Angeles.

World Baseball Classic brings fans together

By STEVE FORRESTER
The Daily Astorian

Writer's Notebook

Caribbean beisbol is suffused with drums, horns, singing and even dancers on the roofs of dugouts.

Baseball comes in many varieties. There is American big city, stick-ball tradition. There is rural baseball, played on sandlots. There is minor league baseball in the South (the Durham Bulls of the movie “Bull Durham”), in the Southwest (Reno Aces) and the Northwest (Tacoma Rainiers).

There is Caribbean beisbol — with the music of drums and horns and even dancers on the roofs of dugouts. And the Asian baseball variety — with organized cheering in Japan and cooking in the stands in Korea.

These international varieties come together every four years in the World Baseball Classic. It was former Commissioner Bud Selig’s brainchild. And a good one.

My wife and I, two Portland friends and a friend from St. Louis took in the final three games this week at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles.

Heart-stopping pitcher

On a cool Monday night we saw Puerto Rico squeak past the Netherlands 4-3 in 11 innings. At first glance, you wonder how the Dutch can field a professional baseball team. Its players were born in the Caribbean islands owned by the Netherlands. For instance, Kenley Jansen, the heart-stopping short-term relief pitcher of the L.A. Dodgers, was born in Curacao.

The Netherlands should have won the Monday night game. “An offensive powerhouse” is how The New York Times described the Dutch team. But men on first and second base in the first inning were put out after violating fundamentals and making boneheaded mistakes. When, two batters later, a Dutch batsman homered into the left field stands, the Netherlands should have had an additional two runs.

Usually a team’s fatal error is committed in the late innings. The Dutch got it over with within the first 15 minutes of the game.

As Dodger Stadium emptied following Puerto Rico’s win, it was a spectacle of shrieking, horns and celebration, akin to a World Series win.

Puerto Rico’s team is loaded with dangerous talent such as Yadier Molina of the St. Louis Cardinals and Angel Pagan, a San Francisco Giants free agent.

Clash of cultures

This was the first time America’s team made it to the championship finals. The USA team comes to the international competition with a cultural deficit, because the Latin baseball culture is all about enthusiasm, just as Japan’s is about cultish devotion. Except in post-season play, Major League Baseball in the U.S. lacks heartfelt emotion. It is more business and advertising than game.

When Japan faced off against the USA team on Tuesday, it was the clash of two baseball cultures — both of which are corporate, in a sense. The American, MLB culture

is corporate, because the players are mostly millionaires. When their play becomes risky or emotional, we are amazed. Modern-era eccentrics like Jim Bouton and R.A. Dickey are rare.

The Japanese baseball machine never stops coming at you. The Japanese had few MLB players. The great bulk of Japan’s team were young men you’ve never heard of. And especially for the Japanese pitchers, this world stage was a great audition moment.

Despite the crowd’s chanting “USA, USA,” the American team was blasé about its victory over Japan, after a hard-fought, one-run margin. By contrast, on Monday night the Puerto Rican team — some cloaked in their national flag — was as exuberant as a group of adolescents who had won the state championship for their high school.

And that describes why this WBC is so much fun. It also showed itself in the Japanese fans with headbands, waving Japanese flags. A few young Japanese men camped it up in white face make-up akin to Kabuki actors.

More than one wrinkle

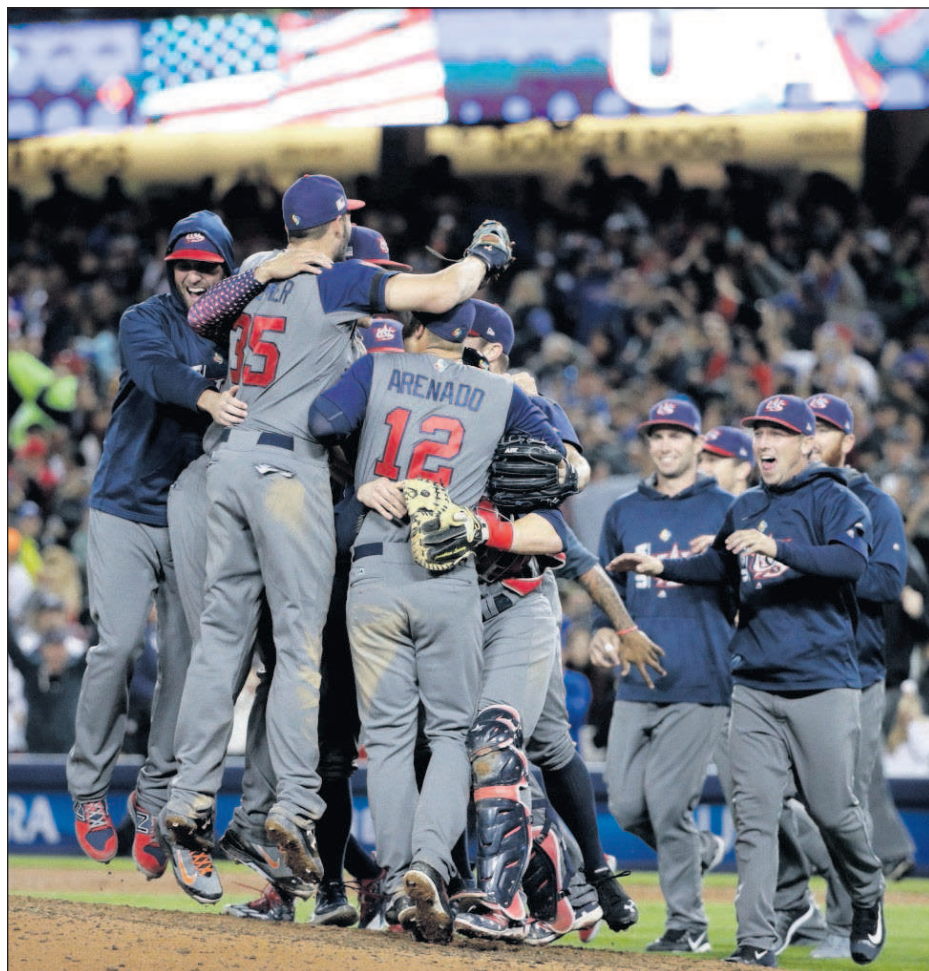
Wednesday night’s championship showdown between Puerto Rico and the USA presented more than one wrinkle. After all, Puerto Rico is an American territory. Its New York City immigrants are famously presented in Leonard Bernstein’s “West Side Story,” singing “I like to be in America.”

The build-up to the championship game was noisy, with rival chants of “U-S-A” and “Puer-to-RI-co.”

The surprise is that the game was not close. With so much power in the Puerto Rican lineup, it was conceivable they would win. But in the third inning, the U.S. blew the game open with a two-run home run. US pitching insured that Puerto Rico never landed a punch. It was an 8-0 blowout.

But as it flooded out of Dodger Stadium, the near-capacity crowd seemed not to care. Certainly Puerto Rico’s partisans were deeply disappointed. And if two of us are part of the same nation. But all of us are three baseball games are close and well-played ... well, that is enough for me in the first days of spring.

Steve Forrester is the former editor and publisher of *The Daily Astorian*.



AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

U.S. players celebrate an 8-0 win over Puerto Rico in the final of the World Baseball Classic in Los Angeles Wednesday.



AP Photo/Carlos Giusti

People gather to watch television coverage of the World Baseball Classic final between Puerto Rico and the United States in San Juan, Puerto Rico.



United States eagle statue mascot stands on the mound in celebration, a blue cap jauntily hanging from one of its large wings, after their 8-0 win over Puerto Rico.

AP Photo Mark J. Terrill