

But it has quickly become apparent that the current status of U.S.-Cuba relations still leaves MLB largely in a state of limbo. For years the U.S. Treasury Department has required Cuban players to establish third-country residence and then obtain a license guaranteeing earned money would not return to Cuba in violation of U.S. embargo policies. But in a rather surprising move, Treasury this past week reversed its policy and began requiring only that Cuban baseball defectors obtain a “general license” permit before being cleared for MLB contract offers. This reversal would obviously ease the process of signing, say, a young free agent like current multi-tooled prospect Yoen Moncada, a talented 19-year-old infielder with little experience in high-level international play.

Nonetheless there are still hurdles to clear. In an effort to halt the wild and speculative spending on Cubans in recent months, MLB last year adopted salary cap requirements that restrict bonus payments to athletes who are under 25 and have not performed a limited term of duty at the Cuban national team level. But in a case like Moncada’s this likely will have little impact as some cash-flush team will surely cough up \$40 million on risky speculation alone and willingly accept an added \$40 million in salary cap penalties for inking a player who doesn’t fit within the narrow MLB signing restrictions.

In the light of the changing dynamic between Washington and Havana, there has been much speculation about floodgates soon opening and top Cuban players by the dozens if not hundreds pouring into big league stadiums. There are even wild speculations about MLB academies of the type long employed in the Dominican Republic being constructed throughout the island. There are even notions afloat about clubs sending hordes of scouts to prowl Cuban League games. But most of those reporting on or dreaming about this return to U.S. pre-revolution-style domination of Castroland simply have not done their homework or considered the realities of the new millennium. They understand little of Cuba’s current situation, nor do they comprehend the actualities of baseball’s central role in Cuban politics and society.

Dreams of an open player market in Cuba actually originated a full year before Obama’s stunning announcements of December 2014. In September 2013 Cuba unveiled a revamped domestic league system that would allow at least some players to perform in professional leagues overseas. The process had begun in a limited fashion the previous summer when a handful of veteran players headed by much-coveted slugger Alfredo Despaigne were assigned to the Mexican League Campeche club. The U.S. press, however, fully misinterpreted the Cuban plan and misrepresented the impact of the Havana announcement. Cuba was not declaring its athletes to be free agents; league officials and not players would negotiate overseas deals; and MLB was not at all on the radar under the Cuban new plan.

Cuba’s new initiative had two clearly defined and untouchable tenets. One was that players would remain property of the government-controlled baseball enterprise and would essentially be loaned—not sold—to foreign leagues. Players would not be released to depart the homeland and seek their fortunes elsewhere as true free agents. Indeed, more than 10 percent of their foreign salaries would be paid directly to the Cuban sports

ministry. The second requirement in the Cuban plan specified that their loaned players would return from summer play abroad for full service in the winter season National Series at home. They would be available at all times to the national team, so vital to a Cuban system which gains international prestige through overseas baseball triumphs. The Cuban plan left no room for any exchange of players with the U.S. major leagues since MLB clubs would never allow players to remain Cuban League properties and would never assent to an Abreu or Puig returning home each winter for an additional 100-plus-game winter league season.

Cuba's plan with Mexico quickly collapsed under a cloud of embarrassment, thanks to a scandal involving a falsified Dominican passport rigged by the Campeche club for star slugger Despaigne's 2014 return. Affiliated with organized baseball, the Mexican League had been apprised that Despaigne and others were subject to U.S. Treasury restrictions requiring residence outside of Cuba, a condition that spurred the Mexicans to invent false documents in the effort to cover their tracks. When an ESPN reporter broke the story of the fake credentials, Mexican League officials quickly banned Despaigne from further competition. But with the door closed to Mexico, Cuba enhanced its plan with the Japanese, which before summer's end included Despaigne as well as top stars Freddie Cepeda (paid a reported \$900,000 for a partial season with the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants), Yulieski Gourriel (playing for the Yokohama DeNA Bay Stars) and touted prospect Héctor Mendoza (also with Yomiuri). By almost any measure the Japanese venture has so far proven highly successful for both the selected Cuban stars and the Nippon clubs employing their services.

The current Cuban plan will not rescue the embattled island's efforts to stabilize its league in the long run. Few Cuban players see the possibility of being selected for overseas service, which has so far been doled out by the national sports ministry to only a handful of mostly veteran stars as a perk for long-term loyalty. A mere four players—veteran stars Cepeda, Gourriel, Despaigne, plus rookie pitching phenom Mendoza—were released to the Japanese last summer and the same contingent will return for the coming season, supplemented by less than a half-dozen possible additions.

Something more drastic is needed to raise ballplayer salaries at home and thus lift morale on the island where top athletes remain economically depressed. And that something may ironically be precisely what is now in the air regarding some form of diplomatic accord with longtime adversarial Americans. What most of those reporting on potential diplomatic détente have so far failed to grasp is the likelihood that any overhauled diplomatic environment is destined to work in favor of the Cubans and thus to the detriment of MLB, at least in the short haul.

Baseball is central to Cuban society and to the Cuban political machinery. For decades it has been a singular source of deep-seated island pride and propagandistic victory abroad—the one arena in which Cuba could beat the yanquis at their own national game. The sport owns a long and deep island history, and just as under the Castro regime the Cubans booted out foreign investors and finally seized complete control of their slim

natural resources, the island's national sport has effectively resisted any vestige of MLB control.

Cuba has witnessed the fate of the Dominican Republic and Venezuela and other Caribbean baseball hotbeds where the local game has been gutted for the sole benefit of professional clubs in North American organized baseball. Under any new accord Cuba will assuredly orchestrate an arrangement that will approximate if not exactly mirror the Japanese League posting system—a system also used by the professional leagues in Korea, Taiwan, and Mexico.

Under such an arrangement players would serve a specified tenure at home, perhaps a period of five to seven seasons. When finally put on the free agent market these players would draw bids for their services, with the MLB club (or even perhaps a Japanese League club) winning rights to negotiate with the coveted prospect and paying a heavy posting fee to the league for that privilege. Cuba will not only benefit directly from the eventual sale of its players—reaping millions to rebuild sagging domestic baseball infrastructure and supplement player salaries on the home front—but it will keep the services of top stars for extended service. And all this will put a sudden end to defections, since renewed diplomatic relations will demand the recognition of Cuban laws and contracts, and players departing early will be blocked from signing with MLB clubs. Cuba alone will stand as the largest winner under the likely scenario.

The shifting winds blowing in Cuba's direction was on full display this past week in San Juan where a club nominally representing last year's league champion Pinar del Río registered the nation's grandest baseball triumph in a full decade. Despite all the player losses through defections and corresponding attrition of league quality at home, the Cubans have remained surprisingly imposing on the international scene. A constant renewal of young talent has resulted in a string of strong showings. A run to the finals of the first MLB World Baseball Classic; World Cup silver medals in 2007, 2009 and 2011; a second-place finish at the Beijing Olympics—all have showcased a remarkable resilience by crack Cuban national squads.

But the big victories and uninterrupted flow of gold medals once marking Cuban diamond superiority have been absent in recent years and morale has sagged at home. Last year Cuba made a much celebrated return to the showcase Caribbean Series in Venezuela—championship playoffs that highlight professional winter league play. The result was an unrivaled disaster, with only a single victory earned and an embarrassing elimination before the semifinal round.

This year it was far different. Cuba started slowly with a pair of opening losses to Mexico and the Dominicans and was dealt a further blow with another pair of defections by the club's starting shortstop and promising top 19-year-old pitching prospect. The loss of hurler Vladimir Gutierrez was especially painful since it left the team with a depleted eight-man pitching corps. But the Cubans rallied dramatically on the final weekend for an historic championship victory, the first in this celebrated event in 55 years. The final charge to victory over previously unbeaten Venezuela (semifinals) and rival Mexico

(finals) was paced by the slugging of Cepeda, a clutch home run by Gourriel, and the stellar back-to-back relief outings of Mendoza—three of the four stalwarts seasoned this past summer in Japan. Back home it was a strong signal that something in the embattled Cuban baseball system was still working.

The two player defections also signaled how things are now changing almost daily as rumored détente with the Americans finds its ultimate direction. Unlike so many recent departures motivated largely if not strictly by a desire to cash in on MLB mega-dollars, the two San Juan departures had at least the trappings of political overtones.

Details remain sketchy, but we do know that the two defecting ballplayers were encouraged and aided by a San Juan-based Cuban exile group bent on striking propaganda blows at the Cuban regime. In an interview with USA Today reporter Jorge Ortiz, the group spokesman, abstract painter Williams Carmona, revealed the political intentions behind the ballplayer enticements when he openly claimed that the motive was to “prove the Cuban government wrong.” More recent reports suggest that at least the more promising of the two defectors, Cuban League rookie of the year Gutierrez, was convinced by Carmona to seek U.S. political asylum. And if reports prove true about the political asylum request, it appears to be a move that will subject the top prospect to the MLB amateur player draft and effectively close the possibility of a lucrative multimillion-dollar signing bonus. In essence, we may now be faced with a distasteful case of a young Cuban ballplayer being manipulated to accomplish the political agendas of others at the cost of his potentially lucrative baseball future.

The Gutierrez case underscores complexities in a current environment that still isolates Cuban League baseball from the monopolistic MLB. But vital lessons can already be learned from events unfolding in San Juan this past week. Cuban baseball remains strong and resilient on the international scene, and the Cuban government is no more likely to hand over its cherished national sport than it is to relinquish control of tourist hotels to outsiders like the Sheraton or Hilton chains, or sell off its fabled rum production to the expatriate Bacardi family, or surrender any other treasured natural resources so jealously guarded during more than a half-century of state socialist control. And for new defectors like Gutierrez, the window may be quickly closing on a dream of big league dollars available to any Cuban pitcher or slugger who walks away from a hotel, jumps a fence, or finds a route out his homeland aboard a high-speed power launch capable of outrunning the Cuban coast guard.