

WORLDVIEW

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FAST PITCH

A few friends gather around the mound in Nicaragua

by Steve Hellinger

I had stood on this very spot so many times so many years before. Some 26 years ago, I had felt the self-confidence that speed and dexterity instill in a 22-year-old. Now, as I looked in from my shortstop position at the batter and at the sun setting behind the grandstand, I felt simply a tranquility that comes from seeing everything in its natural place.

There, behind home plate, was Neil Seldman, my friend of more than 20 years and - for almost as long - catcher on our fast-pitch softball team in the Washington, DC area. A glance over my left shoulder and there, in centerfield, just where he was supposed to be and where he has been for 40-something years, was my twin brother Doug. We have played together so long-from the street in front of our childhood home through college ball and onto more baseball and fastpitch softball on many another field-that he would know, simply by my cry of "Duke" (as he is known to me and to all others with whom he has ever played ball) exactly where I was for a relay throw. He would invariably hit me perfectly, head-high, with a blind throw from the left-centerfield wall. He had done so twice in this game already.

And there, managing the team from along the first-base line (and serving as designated hitter because of a bad knee), was my friend Carlos Blanco, with whom I had lived in this little Nicaraguan town at the beginning of the 1970s. Carlos had at that time recently returned from the States, where he had played in the minor-league systems of the Braves and Giants, reaching Triple-A with the latter and playing with the likes of Bobby Bonds, Ollie Brown and other future stars.

Had the Peace Corps known of Carlos when they sent me, a baseball zealot, here to Teustepe? Had they known about his brother, Luis, who would go on to team and star with Denis Martinez in the Nicaraguan major leagues before Martinez was signed by the Orioles? Or the three Mairena brothers, one of whom was with the Cardinals' Triple-A club and the other two leaders of Nicaragua's medal-winning team in the Pan American Games? Could they have foreseen that, with these and other standouts, we would criss-cross Nicaragua on Sundays, challenging other towns and never lose? Could they have known that Carlos and I would become friends for a lifetime and that, 20 years after he and his family had moved to California, we would return to Nicaragua to challenge the new generation of Teustepe ballplayers?

Teustepe in those days had only 900 inhabitants, and the cooperative program in which the Peace Corps had placed me to bring electricity to the area was, like so many other development initiatives at that time, soon rendered a travesty by the corrupt Somoza dictatorship. Indeed, independent organizing of any sort to promote change in the community was difficult, given the vigilance of the Somoza-named mayor, the Guardia Nacional and the local "orejas"-town residents who served as the "ears" of the Somoza regime.

Everyone knew who the informants were, and they were accepted, like the two town prostitutes, the local priest and the star ballplayers, as part of the life of the community. For all the turbulence in Nicaragua's history, nothing much had changed in 200 years in towns like Teustepe, and life in general had a certain fluidity to it.

The control of the country by the Somoza family-father and two sons - since it rid the country, with the assistance of the U.S. Marines, of the rebel threat in the 1930s with the murder of the pro-democracy Augusto Cesar Sandino, only re-inforced a strong sense of fatalism. One day in early 1971 when I asked a Managua taxi driver what was new upon my return to Nicaragua from a vacation, he said, "Things continue as always. God is in the heavens and the Somozas are here on earth."

The Marines' legacy was not altogether negative: they brought to Nicaragua the game of baseball, which became the national pastime. With opportunities for meaningful development work limited, my days-like those of my Nicaraguan mates after they returned from cultivating fields of tomatoes, peppers, onions, rice, and beans-revolved around our afternoon baseball practices. Fastballs and curveballs, ground balls and fly balls would fill the hours, along with the insult-laden "ragging" and constant laughter that characterize a people who have managed to survive earthquakes, poverty, repression, and political upheavals over the past century. This daily ritual would be played out under beautiful and sometimes stormy skies on a field that more closely approximated a pasture, located a short walk up a rocky road from the equally bare town plaza. Practice generally ended with a spectacular Central American sunset. It was time for dinner.



Shortstop Steve Hellinger [second from right] posed after a 6-2 victory over a younger Nicaraguan team with [from left] centerfielder Doug Hellinger, manager Carlos Blanco, and catcher Neil Seldman. The author and Blanco, retired from a career with the Braves and Giants, played ball together in Teustepe in the 1970s.

I would invariably have my dinner with Carlos, his wife Leila and their kids, who treated me as part of their family. Even when they left for the States, I have continued to be treated with the same warm hospitality by Carlos' father and his second wife and family during the many visits I have made to Teustepe since 1971. The work I have done in Latin America over the past 20 years has given me these opportunities to see my old friends. Sometimes, if I've had no pressing policy agenda in Managua, I would avoid that unpleasant city altogether and catch the bus from the airport and head northeast to Teustepe, some 50 miles away.

More often, however-given the unfortunate and persistent habit of the U.S. government of interfering with many a people's quest for justice around the world-there has been reason to visit the capital. Whether it has been for the purpose of diverting foreign aid from the Somoza regime to citizens' organizations, securing aid for the Sandinista government, fighting the U.S. orchestration of the contra war, or freeing the Chamorro government from

odious World Bank economic policies, Managua has always been a frequent port of call for me.

No visit, however, has ever meshed Duke's and my dual passions quite like our arrival in Nicaragua in early 1980 with the Orioles and their new star pitcher, Martinez. For a weekend the Orioles took the country by storm, playing (and losing to) Nicaragua's national team, doing what they could to mend fast deteriorating relations between the United States and the fledgling Sandinista government. It was the first-ever visit to this baseball-crazy country by a U.S. major-league team, and it came on the heels of the expulsion of a U.S.-backed dictatorship and amidst a popular revolution. The Orioles arrival was a signal of respect for the Nicaraguan people. It struck a chord that still reverberates in the Nicaraguan national psyche.

It was this deep desire for mutual respect that long ago endeared me to this warm, humble, and generous people. One's relative wealth or ideology means little to them; trust and friendship mean everything. This trust has indeed been tested during and in the aftermath of the contra war of the 1980s, a conflict which helped to shatter the Nicaraguan economy, divide families and communities, and de-stabilize the

Sandinista government. While these fissures are slowly healing on the personal level, the political divisions-along with the draconian economic adjustments imposed by the United States through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the 1990s-have made the effective governing of Nicaragua by successive governments difficult.

Given this historical and continuing role played by the U.S. government in Nicaragua, I am all the more appreciative of the home and friendships I have there. When Carlos suggested we return to Teustepe for a week and organize our former teammates to play the 20-somethings who now represent the town, my immediate reaction was, yes, and let's invite Duke and Neil, as well.

What seemed a compelling idea us appeared odd to friends and family. When we laid out our plan, the common response was, "Now, exactly why are you doing this?"



Blanco and Seldman hold a post-game critique.

Frankly, I thought anyone who could not see the value of flying thousands of miles to play baseball in the middle of nowhere against guys half one's age was quite daft. Neil, Duke, and Carlos concurred. So, on New Year's Eve, we packed our gloves and spikes-our passports to so many friendships over the years, along with baseball equipment, jerseys, and caps for the Teustepeños, and headed south.

What we experienced over the ensuing week, in its simplicity and sheer joyfulness, exceeded anything we could have anticipated. True, the two games we played on the concluding weekend did not quite amount to the inter-era clash of giants that we had foreseen. Following the first practice just hours after we had landed at the Managua airport, we agreed that our new goal was simply to survive the week.

Nursing assorted ailments, we found ourselves trying to field or dodge vicious smashes that jumped off the bats of young studs, shot out of a glaring sun and ricocheted off a pock-marked surface that clearly had

not seen a grounds crew for decades. Did I really handle those ground balls 26 years ago? Was our team in those days indeed better-as we had perhaps arrogantly speculated-than the current team, which could "pick it" and turn the double play with a quickness and grace about which we could only marvel?

As the week progressed, we began to feel more comfortable and confident on the ballfield. We started losing veteran players who found the first workout too arduous after 10 years away from the game. The young guys- "los chavalos " -were getting better, and other members of the municipality's all-star team were arriving from the outlying "comarcas" for a scheduled Sunday doubleheader against a club from a nearby town.

Teustepe has tripled in size since I lived there. Six teams now play in an organized regional league-just a step below the Primera Division-and 12 peasant teams compete in the comarcas. The growth has come after a setback in the 1960s when a political demonstration was held during a game at the Estadio Nacional in Managua, and Somoza banned pro baseball.

The town has changed considerably on its surface-paved roads in the center, greenery in the plaza, running water, electricity, and a stop sign for a community where horses are still the major mode of transportation. Teustepe has maintained its simplicity and, unfortunately, its generalized poverty. Like the rest of Nicaragua, Teustepe has been victimized by the externally imposed economic policies that have strangled the local economy, generating widespread unemployment and hopelessly low wage levels. By local accounts, at least four out of every five residents cannot find work in the town and must seek jobs in

the informal economy in Nicaragua's cities, where they earn the daily equivalent of U.S. \$3 to \$5. Those who do find employment in the agricultural sector, which has been ravaged by the influx of cheap imports and the high cost of inputs and borrowing, make approximately U.S. \$2.50 per day. While this is more than twice what a "campesino" earned when I lived in Teustepe in 1970, the cost of living has increased more than sevenfold since then. Today, what a campesino is paid can barely feed his family at the most minimal level and fails to cover any other family expenses. Skilled workers and professionals are not faring much better. Nurses and teachers, for example, earn only in the range of U.S. \$60 per month.

This dismal state of affairs led to discussions in-between baseball games about starting employment-generating enterprises, particularly through the recycling of garbage and agricultural waste-an undertaking in which Neil and his Institute for Local Self-Reliance have long been engaged in localities across the United States. As we explore the options and feasibility of these ideas with the people of Teustepe, the emphasis remains on maximizing community control of the venture and on ensuring the payment of a dignified wage with which one can satisfactorily support a family.

For all their travails, Nicaraguans have always known how to enjoy life. Collaborating with the local townspeople became a labor of love for us all. These are my friends, but they immediately embraced Neil and Duke, and welcomed them into their homes. My twin brother had visited Teustepe briefly many years before, but my Nicaraguan friends still think he was me. Each passing day was an idyllic re-enactment of the day before: arising from our beds off a courtyard behind a bar; eating rice, beans, and accompaniments with Carlos and his brothers across the street in the back of their father's general store; playing ball in the afternoon; hanging with friends and colleagues, a pastime enhanced by quantities of beer or rum.

But it was baseball that remained the center of our days. Accompanied by a coterie of fellow ballplayers and lots of town youth, we carried our equipment bags on the daily pilgrimage to the ballpark-now fully enclosed with stands and outfield walls. Once changed into our spikes and warmed up, we would take the field for a two or three-hour workout. During that time, the boys in us would be buoyed by every fungo, infield drill and batting practice, and by the camaraderie and the opportunity to indulge our passion in this warm and simple setting. Baseball has long been for us - as for so many others - a direct route to our childhood. In Teustepe, we couldn't get enough of it.

Finally, it was Saturday afternoon and game time. The under-30s had few all-stars, but they fielded a decent team. Two former members of the national team came from the neighboring town to fill in for some of our rickety veterans. Duke had started the week stumbling in the outfield on a tightly wrapped ankle he had broken playing softball during the summer. But he drove in three runs with two hits and glided like his old self for flyballs. Neil lashed two hits: one after hitting the dirt to avoid a high, inside fastball; the other just moments after he pointed to a rainbow beyond the left-field wall. Of lesser stuff are legends made. He also skillfully handled the sharp curves and fastballs of our very capable pitcher. Before a modest but supportive crowd, we won, 6-2.

The following afternoon, we took the field again for a less serious affair. Carlos, despite being unable to turn on the bail, continued to hit it hard. I was hitless on Saturday, but on this day I managed to plug the right-centerfield gap with a line drive to the wall. I had been running for months in anticipation of this very moment, and I knew I could stretch a certain double into a triple. As they say, I ran every bit as hard as I did in my youth; I just didn't get there as fast. Only a blown call by the umpire got me to third base safely. In the "gloaming," well after sunset, we had to walk away satisfied with a 7-7 tie.

Neil, Duke, Carlos, and I are all back in the States now. Our souls are soothed, and none of us has ever felt better. We're already talking about returning with a team of our own next year, and about how grateful we are that we have this sport that readily puts us in touch with what we love and who we are.

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