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The Duke of Havana: Baseball, Cuba, and the Search for the American Dream

Steve Fainaru, Ray Sanchez

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In 1998, a mysterious right-handed pitcher emerged from the ashes of the Cold War and helped lead the New York Yankees to a World Championship. His origins and even his age were uncertain. His name was Orlando El Duque Hernandez. He was a fallen hero of Fidel Castro's socialist revolution.

The chronicle of El Duque's triumph is at once a window into the slow death of Cuban socialism and one of the most remarkable sports stories of all time. Once hailed as a paragon of Castro's revolution, the finest pitcher in modern Cuban history was banned from baseball for life for allegedly plotting to defect. Instead of accepting his punishment, he fearlessly fought back, defying the Communist party authorities, vowing to pitch again, and ultimately fleeing his country in the bowels of a thirty-foot fishing boat.

Here, for the first time and in astonishing detail, the secrets behind El Duque's persecution and escape are revealed. Moving from the crumbling streets of post Cold War Havana to the polarized world of exile Miami, from the deadly Florida Straits to the hallowed grounds of Yankee Stadium, it is a story of cloak-and-dagger adventure, audacious secret plots, the pull of big money, and the historic collision of ideologies.

Present throughout are the larger-than-life characters who converged at this bizarre intersection of baseball and politics: El Duque himself, Fidel Castro, the Miami sports agent Joe Cubas, the late John Cardinal O'Connor along with scouts, smugglers, and the Cuban ballplayers who gave up their lives as tools of socialism to test the free market and chase their major-league dreams.

Reported in the United States and Cuba by two award-winning journalists who became part of the story they were covering, The Duke of Havana is a riveting saga of sports, politics, liberation, and greed.

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