

Opening Day, Havana

More than 2,000 people attended as Monsignor Alfredo Muller, the Catholic bishop of Havana, blessed El Gran Stadium on Thursday, October 25, 1946. The new steel-and-concrete stadium was the product of La Compañía Operadora de Stadiums, the company formed by wealthy Cubans Bobby Maduro and Miguelito Suárez to build a more modern baseball stadium close to the heart of Havana, one to accommodate growing attendance. El Gran Stadium “represents a great bit of dreaming” by Maduro and Suárez, J. G. Taylor Spink wrote in the *Sporting News*. “Construction difficulties, labor troubles, and mounting costs hiked their expenditure to \$1,800,000, when they had figured to spend one million.”¹ Havana’s new baseball cathedral was only three-quarters complete for the monsignor’s benediction. And the start of the 1946–47 Cuban League season was a day away. No matter. The season would start on schedule in its new home.

Construction issues and an incomplete stadium were far from the only potential hurdles leading up to opening day. For months, Mexican League president Jorge Pasquel had been luring major-league players to jump their contracts for the monetarily greener pastures of Mexico. Many of those players had been stalwarts in Cuba’s winter league. And Cuban League managers and coaches also had participated in the Mexican League. For them, stints in Mexico meant banishment from organized baseball—Major League Baseball and its affiliated professional

minor leagues—if they did not desist. For the Cuban League, having those players, managers, and coaches on their rosters could mean excommunication from organized baseball. Aside from outside threats—sanctions imposed by baseball commissioner Happy Chandler for jumping to Mexico—the Cuban League faced a threat from within as well: a rival league made up of players in good standing with organized baseball. The alternate league would play at La Tropical, the stadium that had been home to the Cuban League from 1930 to 1946. How would such a schism impact a sport that had become so ingrained in Cuban culture since the 1870s?



Albert Benjamin “Happy” Chandler turned his attention to politics not long after graduating from law school at the University of Kentucky in 1924. Born in Corydon, Kentucky, on July 14, 1898, the jovial Chandler earned his nickname while playing baseball at Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky. He served as a senator in the Kentucky state legislature, as the state’s lieutenant governor, and then as governor before representing his home state in the U.S. Senate from October 10, 1939, until October 19, 1945. That’s when Chandler, who had advocated for the game to continue operating during World War II, resigned to become commissioner of baseball. After baseball’s first commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, died on November 25, 1944, Major League Baseball’s sixteen owners unanimously elected Chandler on April 24, 1945.²

Almost from his first day as commissioner, Chandler found himself dealing with history-altering events. The month he was officially installed, Dodgers president Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson with the intention of having him break baseball’s color barrier—a plan opposed by baseball’s other fifteen team owners. And not long after Chandler took office, Major League Baseball faced perhaps its biggest outside challenge since the rival Federal League of 1914–15 tried luring major-league players with more lucrative contracts. Perpetrating the raids this time was Pasquel. By February of 1946 he had already started throwing around the \$30 million he had at his disposal for the Mexican

League “so as to make it as good, or better than, baseball in the United States.”³

As far as Pasquel was concerned, he was giving organized baseball a taste of its own medicine. And he and his brothers were more than willing to engage in a little saber rattling. Pasquel argued that, for years, major-league teams had raided players under Mexican League contracts, specifically accusing Washington Senators scout Joe Cambria of the tactic. Cambria was a ubiquitous presence in Cuba, where he became affectionately known as Papa Joe. The native of Messina, Italy, began signing Cuban players for Senators owner Clark Griffith in 1932 with the purchase of Ysmael “Mulo” Morales from Alex Pompey’s New York Cubans of the Negro National League. During his three decades as a scout, Papa Joe signed more than four hundred Cuban players, many of them for Griffith, who had managed the Cincinnati Reds in 1911 when Armando Marsans and Rafael Almeida became the first Cuban-born players in the majors of the modern era. But because he signed players cheaply, not everyone in Cuba was enamored of Cambria. Cuban sportswriter Jess Losada of *Carteles* “acidly referred to him as the Christopher Columbus of baseball, denoting his thirst for and taking of the island’s treasures.”⁴

Pasquel’s accusation that Cambria had raided the Mexican League of players under contract was the same complaint leveled by those inside organized baseball against the Pasquel brothers. But Pasquel had no intention of apologizing for or backing down from using his considerable wealth as payback. He insisted he needed big-name players and managers “to prove to the baseball world at large that we’re not fooling when we say the Mexican League is going big time.”⁵ With the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* proclaiming that baseball in the United States “is like a slave market,” Gerardo Pasquel, one of the five brothers, agreed: “We treat the players right here. We don’t treat them like slaves.”⁶ The headline and quote were part of a story that featured an interview with former New York Giants outfielder Danny Gardella, who was among the Pasquel brothers’ early major-league recruits. “I do not intend to let the New York Giants enrich themselves any further, at my expense,” Gardella said when he informed baseball writers on February 18 that he had accepted a five-year contract to play in Mexico after the Giants

were only willing to pay him \$500 more than the \$4,500 he had earned in 1945.⁷

Gardella was but the first domino to fall. The same day as Gardella's announcement, Puerto Rican-born Dodgers outfielder/infielder Luis Rodríguez Olmo jumped his contract for a reported three-year, \$40,000 deal in Mexico. Ten days later, Chicago White Sox pitcher Alejandro "Patón" Carrasquel bolted for a reported three-year, \$10,000 offer. But the Mexican League had its sights set much higher than the Danny Gardellas, Luis Olmos, and Alejandro Carrasquels of the major-league world. On March 9, Boston Red Sox slugger Ted Williams rejected a \$500,000 offer from Bernardo Pasquel. Two days later, Cleveland Indians ace Bob Feller confirmed he too had rejected an offer from the Pasquels, who also had taken an unsuccessful run at Detroit Tigers slugger Hank Greenberg.⁸

With such brazen efforts to abscond with contractually obligated, top-notch major-league talent, Chandler had no choice but to act to stop the raids. At a March 1946 meeting in Havana to welcome the Havana Cubans to the Class-C Florida International League and organized baseball, Chandler "issued a flat and vigorous directive to all players who have jumped contracts." His edict was simple: These players must return to their major-league teams by the start of the 1946 season or face banishment from the majors for at least five seasons. "They may not apply for reinstatement until after five years and application may not be granted even after that passage of time."⁹

Despite Chandler's warning, Pasquel's money was too enticing for some. Cuban players Tomás de la Cruz, formerly of the Cincinnati Reds, and the brothers Oliverio and Roberto Ortiz of the Washington Senators were in Mexican League uniforms when the season opened on March 22, 1946. News of St. Louis Browns shortstop Vern Stephens signing a Mexican League contract for \$100,000 for five years was reported on March 30 (he returned from Mexico after just two games). On March 31, New York Giants players Sal Maglie, George Hausmann, and Roy Zimmerman jumped their major-league contracts and headed south of the border after each received the promise of a \$5,000 bonus

and “at least twice as much as we would be receiving from the Giants,” Maglie said.¹⁰

Hausmann and Zimmerman, unhappy with their limited playing time in spring training, approached Maglie one day about how to get in touch with the Pasquels. They knew their teammate had turned down an offer to join the Mexican League during the winter in Cuba, and Maglie still had the business card Bernardo Pasquel had given him. Later in the day in his hotel room, Maglie allowed Hausmann and Zimmerman to use his phone to secure contracts with the Mexican League. Even Maglie got on the phone, taking one last shot to see if he could get Pasquel to double the \$7,500 salary he was set to make with the Giants. When Pasquel wouldn't up his previous offer, Maglie hung up the phone, never realizing how much trouble lay ahead. “That's what fucked me up with [Giants owner Horace] Stoneham and [manager Mel] Ott,” he said years later. “I suppose the switchboard operator told somebody about the call, and since it came from my room the club figured it was me who made it.”¹¹

The next day, Ott summoned Maglie into the manager's office and angrily accused Maglie of working as an agent for the Pasquel brothers. A livid Ott demanded to know which other Giants players were going to jump to the Mexican League. A stunned and now equally angry Maglie told Ott to figure it out for himself. Ott stormed out of his office, lining up his players and interrogating them about the Mexican League. In that moment, Maglie had to have felt that his major-league career was over after it had barely begun. At age twenty-eight, he had played all of thirteen games in the majors for the Giants in 1945, and he was about to turn his back on his dream, knowing it would lead to at least a five-year ban under Chandler's edict. Maglie boarded a train from the Giants' spring training site in Miami for Mexico.¹²

Before the start of the 1946 major-league season, Chandler, in an interview printed in the *Sporting News*, reiterated his earlier warning. Any players who jumped their organized baseball contracts to sign with the Mexican League would be barred for at least five years if they did not return to their teams by opening day of the 1946 major-league season: “Any jumper who is barred will not have the right to appeal for reinstatement within five years,” Chandler said, “and after this five-year

period is finished, there may be certain cases in which I will not even then entertain a plea for reinstatement.”¹³ Jumpers seemed unconcerned by Chandler’s threats. “I’m perfectly happy here,” former Dodgers catcher Mickey Owens declared. “I have no regrets,” Carrasquel said. “Who would, leaving the White Sox?” And Gardella quipped: “I assure you I’m just as happy as Ott and probably less confused.”¹⁴

Chandler also specifically addressed Cuba, saying baseball officials there had asked him to come to the island the previous fall to “help them rectify their situation.” The commissioner promised there would be no ineligible players—either those who had jumped their organized baseball contracts or those who played with or against ineligible players in Mexico—in the Cuban League for the 1946–47 season. He also said he was willing to forget previous transgressions, such as St. Louis Cardinals owner Sam Breadon sending Lou Klein, Fred Martin, and Dick Sisler to play for Miguel Ángel González’s Habana team during the 1945–46 Cuban League season, but Chandler also said he was going to “see that this sort of thing does not occur again.”¹⁵

Chandler’s warnings also did nothing to prevent further incursions by the Pasquels. Despite repeated denials, New York Yankees shortstop Phil Rizzuto agreed to accept a five-year offer worth \$12,000 per year, plus a \$15,000 bonus, after meeting with Bernardo Pasquel at a dinner party at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria hotel in early May. But the next day Rizzuto had second thoughts, and a day later the Yankees filed suit to enjoin the Mexican League from trying to sign American League players.¹⁶ By May 23 reports surfaced that Klein, Martin, and St. Louis Cardinals teammate Max Lanier, who would go on to play significant roles in the 1946–47 Cuban League season, were preparing to jump to the Mexican League. The trio failed to show up at New York’s Polo Grounds for the conclusion of a series against the Giants. Instead Bernardo Pasquel escorted them to Mexico’s tourist bureau in New York to obtain permits to visit Mexico. Before the team checked out of the Hotel New Yorker, Lanier left a note telling Cardinals teammate and road roommate Red Schoendienst, “So long, Red. Keep hitting line drives. I’ll see you next winter and we’ll go hunting. Best of luck.” Lanier reportedly was offered a five-year contract worth \$30,000 a year, plus a \$50,000 signing bonus. “I can make more down there in a