



BUENA VISTA CRICKET CLUB

THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION MIGHT HAVE COME TO CUBA, BUT CRICKET MANAGED TO MISS THE PARTY. THAT WAS UNTIL A LITTLE OLD LADY HAD A CRAZY IDEA

Salsa music blares out over the dusty streets. In a small square in a distant suburb of Havana, a truck filled with fruit and vegetables pulls up, and crowds of people gather to buy some desperately needed food. Down the street, in a tiny first-floor flat, two Cubans in their 60s don't care about any of this. They're intently watching a video recording of an Australia vs South Africa cricket match.

The small sitting room has a colourful horse tapestry on one wall and a china doll on the coffee table. Welcome to the headquarters of the Cuban Cricket Commission.

"Until nine months ago, I never knew what cricket was," confesses the commission's vice-chairman, Adolfo Cartman Brown, pressing STOP on the VCR and reluctantly giving *Inside Sport* his full attention. "But now it's my life. I watch videos, I read about it. I love the game. Thanks to her."

He motions towards a beaded curtain and moments later, Leona Ford emerges, bearing a tea tray. The MCC chairman's Christmas card may sit proudly on her mantelpiece, but he's not known for making journalists a cup of tea. Ford is, in many ways, different. She is 61 and the world's only female head of a

national cricket association. Thanks to her persistence, Cuba recently held its first competitive cricket match in nearly 30 years.

"The sport was played a little in Cuba by the aristocracy," she says. "But my father, Leonard – who was originally from Barbados – was a member of the first group that really popularised the game in the 1920s. There were a lot of West Indian immigrants working in the sugar mills in the east of the island. The club meetings were held at my home, and when I was little I used to hear about it a lot. There were photographs all over the house.

"But then the revolution came. The clubs were all officially nationalised and, like everything else, they became the property of the government. And people were . . . busy. They were moving around. Cricket died out. The last game we have scorecards for was in 1974, between two small local sides. After that, it only existed in one town in the south called Baraguá, where they would play a game once a year on Emancipation Day, August 1st – the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the British colonies."

Ford was born in Guantánamo, temporary home of alleged Australian terrorists David Hicks and the just-released Mamdouh Habib at Camp X-Ray, and she addresses me like what she is – a friendly schoolteacher. She speaks English with a broad Jamaican accent, Spanish with a Cuban twang, and smiles often. One day, she decided to look into her family history and realised that there was no mention of cricket anywhere in the national archives. She decided to do something about it and embarked on a literary history of the game in Cuba.

"The idea was to give some information about what cricket is to the descendants of some of the players," she says. "In 1997, I went to the National Sports Institute and learned how to take people's testimonies. Two men from the museum guided me in my investigations. One day, they said: 'Why don't you restore cricket itself in Cuba?' I asked a few people if it could be possible and soon got the support of some of the former players, now all very old men."

As it turned out, one of these old men was particularly helpful. In the early- to mid-'50s, there were a number of tours

between Jamaica and Cuba. Captaining one of them from the Caribbean side in 1954 was Howard Cooke, now Sir Howard Cooke, governor-general of Jamaica.

With Sir Howard's support and encouragement, as well as a quiet word with a friend of his by the name of Courtney Walsh, Ford managed to get hold of some second-hand equipment. Some of the former Cuban players who were still living promised to help as coaches and to train umpires – if her crazy scheme could ever get off the ground. She knew that, if her plans to train a new generation were to go anywhere, they would need official support. So she turned to the same government which had itself inadvertently brought about cricket's disappearance 40 years earlier. Perhaps surprisingly, they liked what she was saying and allowed cricket to be designated a "recreational sport". It's not a "full" sport (there are already 35 of those), and so ineligible for government support, but this assignation meant that it could, if individual teachers so wished, be taught in schools.

Ford took up the challenge and, thanks to the delivery of some Kwik Cricket gear, within three years the first stage of her ambitions was fulfilled. The name may bring to mind people dressed in orange rather than in white, but a small soccer stadium in Guantánamo in 2001 was the venue for the first competitive cricket match in Cuba for more than a generation. The Havana and Guantánamo teams fielded a mix of

young local talent and West Indian exchange students. One of the umpires was a player from the '40s and the guest of honour, who ceremonially bowled the first ball (this is a baseball-playing nation, after all), was the Jamaican ambassador. Havana lost to the local side by four wickets.

Three years on and things have moved forward at the pace of a Brett Lee yorker. In 2002, the commission was accepted as an affiliate member of the ICC. Cricket is now taught in 13 of the 15 national provinces. There are more than 500 players in Havana alone and on the island of Juventud just off the coast, it's also being taught to prisoners. In July 2004, the first international tournament on the island was held, with teams from the Cayman, Turk and Caicos Islands competing against a local side. Youth teams are being formed up to under-15 level, and a scout from the West Indies has spotted a 13-year-old bowler in a Havana

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side that he wants to keep an eye on. "We won't participate in the 2007 Youth World Cup," says Ford. "But maybe after that."

But it's not all as easy as winning the Ashes. "We're still a very young commission with no expertise," says Brown. "We are very willing to receive help but we have no funds at all."

"Thanks to someone in Argentina, we've had the rules of cricket translated into Spanish," says Ford. "We also received a significant donation from the president of the Canadian Cricket Association, so now we have equipment and clothing in many parts of the country. But we have to train umpires and coaches, and without a tradition of the sport here, it's very difficult. I'm translating Richard Hadlee's coaching lessons into Spanish but it's a very slow process."

A few years ago, another of Ford's ambitions was fulfilled. She was at Antigua as the guest of honour to watch the West Indies vs South Africa. After years of watching videos, she had finally seen a match live. She returned to Cuba more determined than ever to succeed in her mission.

"Our objective," she says, "is to honour our ancestors. To let the children learn that cricket is a part of their culture and for them to actually go out and play it."

Thanks to Ford and her colleagues, some day soon we may yet see a tour of the Buena Vista Cricket Club. **♣**

– Andrew Losowsky

Illustration by Daron Parton