

The Hidden-Ball Trick, Nicaragua, and Me

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THE HIDDEN-BALL TRICK is one of baseball's most difficult and least-witnessed defensive ploys. I've always been fascinated by this rarely executed maneuver, and by the audacious cunning needed to pull it off. It's not exactly illegal, but it's just renegade and sneaky enough to titillate my anarchistic tendencies. It's also something of a mystery. In fact, it wasn't until I visited Nicaragua that I discovered what the hidden ball trick is really all about.

Accomplishing the hidden-ball trick was an unrealized ambition of my baseball career (which ended, for all intents and purposes, twenty-five years ago when I graduated from high school). Not that I didn't try—in sandlot and Babe Ruth League, we were forever looking to steal an out with the hidden ball. The problem was that we were so pathetically obvious about it. You know the scene: You go to the mound and “confer” with the pitcher, who surreptitiously—or so you and he think—slips you the horsehide. As you're nonchalantly trotting back to position, some sharpie on the other team yells, “Watch out, he's got the

ball!” And you've been foiled again. “How the heck do they do it?” you wonder to yourself as you lob the ball back to the mound. And this underlines one of the main reasons why working the hidden ball trick is so difficult: You not only have to fool the baserunner, you also have to hide your move from the rest of his teammates and their fans.

Since high school, except for the occasional game of over-the-line or some similar ersatz diversion, my diamond exploits have been limited to softball—good hands at shortstop, but the arm, legs and eyes have all gone—until late 1985, when I had the good fortune to be involved in a Walter Mitty-type adventure called “Baseball for Peace.” This excursion was a ten-day, nonpartisan goodwill tour of Nicaragua for players, fans, and writers.

The idea behind “Baseball for Peace” was to promote understanding between the people of the US and Nicaragua through our common national pastime. Ping-pong diplomacy, if you will. From December 28, 1985, to January 7, 1986, a rag-tag group of fifteen North Americans barnstormed around the Nic-

araguan countryside, playing baseball and distributing the many thousands of dollars worth of equipment donated by individuals, schools and three major league teams (Oakland A's, San Francisco Giants, Seattle Mariners). For ballplayers, we had everything from young, semipro to aging, over-the-hill types like myself to my fifteen-year old son, a high school student-athlete sponsored by then-Oakland A's outfielder/first baseman Dusty Baker. We played a variety of Nicaraguan ballclubs, including a farmworker-cooperative's team, a regional championship team, and even a First Division (equivalent of major league) team.

To say that Nicaraguans are crazy for baseball is a monumental understatement—sort of like saying that Romeo really liked Juliet. Baseball is a *passion* in Nicaragua, a profound expression of the national character. There's a saying in Nicaragua that every boy is born with a glove and ball in his hand (“*Nació con un guante y una bola en la mano*”). As such, baseball is one of the main bridges between our cultures.

There were many wonderful moments in the course of our whirlwind tour, but without a doubt, the outstanding highlight of my trip came in the mountain town of Boaco, in our third game, where—you guessed it—I executed, at long last, a bona fide, honest-to-goodness, no-doubt-about-it hidden-ball trick.

In Boaco, we were greeted by a brass band, beauty queens and fireworks, and we were paraded through the streets to the ballpark. The entire population of the city turned out, with people hanging off the rooftops. When we reached the stadium, they lined us up along the foul line, World Series style; we were presented with a trophy, and the local Little Leaguers pinned boutonnières on our shirts. The crowd sang the Nicaraguan national anthem, and then, to our

utter amazement, over the p.a. came the familiar strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Of all the things we'd been treated to in Nicaragua, this was the most unexpected, and one of the most moving. Here were people whose lives are daily threatened by the U.S.-backed *contra* forces, but who were still willing to look beyond that. They somehow dug up a recording of our national anthem because they wanted to honor us in the traditional manner.

The bad news was that we were scheduled to play the Campesino League's regional champion Roberto Clemente team. (Hall-of-Famer Clemente is a national hero, because it was to the Nicaraguan capital of Managua that he was headed with relief aid for the victims of the devastating 1972 earthquake when his plane crashed and he was killed.) In our first two games we had been decisively trounced. One of our problems was that we had no real pitcher. (One member of our club could throw very hard but was terrifyingly wild and quite capable of giving up a mess of walks—not to mention the possibility of his killing someone and provoking an international incident.) We also lacked a catcher, so, by necessity, we borrowed those two key players from the opposition. Now, facing a regional championship club and fearing another rout, we hit upon a real brainstorm. "We want your *best* pitcher and catcher," we told the local officials. No problem. We were introduced to a fellow named Roger Lopez, a reserved little southpaw who, we were told, was just exactly what we were asking for.

We managed to push across a run in the top of the first inning, and Lopez made it stand up. From the outset, he was all business. When he struck out the side in the bottom of the first, we knew he was for real, but it was a relatively minor thing he did that really caught my attention. Checking a new ball which the umpire had given him, he found something about it not to his liking and



Jay Feldman and Roger Lopez

threw it back, requesting a different one. This was highly unusual—all the other pitchers we'd seen worked with anything they were given.

I had the pleasure, at shortstop, of returning the ball to Lopez after we fired it around the infield following each strikeout. Each time, I'd give him a little pump with my arm, and he'd acknowledge my support with the faintest nod of his head.

When we reached the dugout after the inning, I noticed that his glove was a "Danto" brand (the kind used only by the best ballplayers), and for the first time, I also noticed the "NICARAGUA" on the front of his jersey. I put two and two together.

"Have you played for the national all-star team?" I asked in my broken Spanish, pointing to his shirt.

"Yes, for nine years," he answered proudly.

I was in the presence of greatness!

He seemed genuinely pleased that I had made the connection, and his reserve thawed a bit. "This jersey is from the '82 team that toured the world," he said.

Somewhere in the middle innings, I made a play that cemented our friendship. With a runner on second and two out, a batter lifted a high pop-up behind short, and I started back for it. At first, it seemed like a routine play, as I thought I would

only need to go back a few steps onto the outfield grass, but the ball got up into the wind and kept carrying. It was one of those nasty, twisting fly balls that keeps changing direction as it descends, the kind that's a real adventure to stay with, especially when you're going back on it. Nobody else was calling for it, and I realized that I *had* to get it—with two away, the runner would be going all out, and if the ball fell, the tying run would easily cross the plate, the batter would wind up at second, the gates would be open, the seam would unravel, and we'd never recover. I kept going back, and when I caught the ball, I was halfway out in left field. I don't think I ever squeezed a pop fly harder.

When I ran in to the bench, Lopez came over and patted me on the back. "*Buenas manos*," he said appreciatively. That sure made me feel good. After that, whenever we came in from the field, I made a point of spending a few minutes visiting with him during our half-inning at bat.

When we took the field for the bottom of the last inning, Lopez was still throwing a shutout. He'd been held up by good defense, including a diving catch of a sinking line drive by our centerfielder, Mike Martinez, a drug-abuse counselor and semipro ballplayer from Detroit. Now, the

leadoff hitter doubled down the left-field line.

Lopez went to work, popping the next batter up and striking out the one after that. Meanwhile, the runner on second was becoming increasingly daring with his lead, going a little farther on each pitch. On the first delivery to the next batter, he bluffed going to third. The batter swung and missed. I cut in behind the runner, and the catcher rifled a perfect throw down to second. Before the ball arrived, however, the runner came sliding back hard and took my feet out from under me. In the instant I was going down, I thought, "If I don't catch this ball, it's into centerfield, the run scores, and we're in trouble." I didn't actually formulate the thought exactly like that, of course—I didn't have time; it was more of a wordless gestalt. I don't know how I caught the ball because I never saw it, but as I was falling, I instinctively threw my glove up to where I guessed the ball would be, judging by its earlier trajectory (you play enough ball, you do that sort of thing by sixth sense), and it hit squarely, right in the pocket of the mitt.

We rolled around on the ground. The bag, which was not secured, had been kicked about twenty feet, and the second base umpire went to retrieve it. The runner stood up and dusted himself off, his back to me, while the umpire replaced the bag. There was a lot of confusion, and nobody, I realized, was paying any attention to me. My heart leapt. If there ever was a time to pull off the hidden ball trick, now was it. But would Lopez go along? I looked at him and nodded as imperceptibly as I could, and he didn't hesitate a moment; he turned away and went into a beautiful act—kicking dirt, spitting, mopping his brow, and all the while being careful not to commit a balk by approaching the rubber.

I retreated to short, the ball nestled in my glove, resting on my hip. I was hoping the second base umpire could see the ball in my glove. The runner took two steps off second. I wanted

him to take one more step, but then I thought, "If I wait too long, someone's going to figure out that the pitcher doesn't have the ball." So I ran right at the runner. At the last second, he heard me coming and tried to get back to the base, but he was dead. I slapped the tag on his butt and turned around to show the ump the ball. He did a triple pump and rang up the runner for the last out of the game. The crowd exploded. In my excitement I spiked the ball.

I ran for Roger Lopez. We embraced and laughed and slapped palms. It was a sweet moment. I was on Cloud Nine as my teammates mobbed me, thumping me on the back and offering kudos. I tried to savor the moment (how many times in your life do you get to be a hero?), but there was too much happening.

In the ensuing pandemonium, Lopez and I lost track of each other, but later, at the party, we had a chance to discuss the play through an interpreter. It was the fifth time in his career that he had done *la trampa de la pelota escondida*, I learned. "Did you know," he asked me, "that I was trying to tell you to keep the ball?"

"Really? I was trying to tell *you* that I wasn't going to throw it back," I

replied, realizing only now for the first time that each of us had believed the play to be his own idea, but in fact, the thought had occurred to both of us simultaneously!

And I understood then what the hidden ball trick is all about, and why we could never pull it off when we were kids: we were going about it backwards; it has to arise not from intent, but from circumstances. The essence of the play is not trickery—that's simply the external part, the part that shows on the outside. From the inside, the hidden ball trick is dependent on wordless communication and cooperation, because even if you speak the same language, you can't very well yell over to the pitcher, "Now we're going to do the hidden ball trick!" You have to be on the same wave length. You have to read each other's minds. Each player has to know what he *and* the other man need to do to make it work.

And that's how we did it. By the subtlest of looks, two men of different tongues and widely divergent backgrounds silently communicated in the universal language of *baseballese* to executive one of the rarest and most difficult of the game's defensive ploys.