

POV Community Engagement & Education

TOOLS FOR FACILITATION



THE LAST OUT

a film by Sami Khan and Michael Gassert

www.pbs.org/pov



THE LAST OUT

Three Cuban baseball players leave their families and risk exile to train in Central America and chase their dreams of playing in the United States. At the shadowy nexus of the migrant trail and pro sports, *The Last Out* chronicles their difficult journey, from multi-step immigration obstacles and learning English to the broken promises and dubious motives of agents.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Film Summary
3	Using this Guide
4	Participants
5	Key Issues
6	Background Information
9	Sources
10	Discussion Prompts
12	Resources
13	Credits & Acknowledgments

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *The Last Out* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

- **Happy Oliveros** is a Cuban baseball player who leaves Cuba to establish residency in Costa Rica with hopes of securing a Major League Baseball (MLB) contract in North America. He is the first subject in the film to be released from Gus Dominguez's training facility in Costa Rica. Oliveros continues migrating toward the southern border of the United States with his cousin and his cousin's young family. Oliveros arrives in Houston, Texas, begins working, and eventually reunites with his family in Cuba.
- **Carlos Gonzalez** is a Cuban who leaves Cuba to establish residency in Costa Rica with hopes of securing an MLB contract in North America. He does not sign a contract and has issues with the trainers at the Costa Rican facility. Gonzalez eventually departs from the facilities and the film. We later learn that he migrated to the United States and reunited with his family there.
- **Victor Baró** is a Cuban who leaves Cuba to establish residency in Costa Rica with the hope of securing an MLB contract in North America. Of the three Cuban players in the film, he comes the closest to signing a contract. However, he does not sign with a team and decides to continue pursuing professional baseball opportunities. He leaves Costa Rica for the Dominican Republic, where he trains with an organization on the island.
- **Gus Dominguez** is a Cuban-American baseball agent/profiteer. He finances the operation in Costa Rica and assumes responsibility for the players. He expects to retain 20% of their signing bonuses if they sign contracts. Dominguez is well-known for his conviction for smuggling Cuban baseball players out of Cuba. He served a sentence in a U.S. jail before getting back into the baseball business.

The Last Out is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Cuban baseball players and Major League Baseball
- Sports and politics
- Athletic industrial complex
- Mental health and sports
- Cuban migration



CUBAN BASEBALL, DEFECTION, AND MIGRATION

Modern sports have long allowed athletes to become more mobile—to travel and migrate. In Cuba and beyond, many athletes use sports as a tool to develop social mobility and to transcend national boundaries. However, U.S.-Cuban relations present unique challenges that impact the trajectories of Cuban Major League Baseball (MLB) hopefuls like those *The Last Out* follows. Tensions between the governments of the United States and Cuba have created an environment where athletes, many with few resources, must navigate different political systems at odds with each other to pursue their dreams.

In 1960, Fidel Castro, the revolutionary and political leader of Cuba, banned Cuban athletes from participating in certain professional sports, including professional baseball. As a result, Cuban baseball players began defecting (leaving the island nation) to attempt to compete in the MLB. A widespread exodus of Cuban players destined for MLB rosters increased following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Cuban baseball players became concerned for their futures as the Cuban economy was in shambles. Since Castro's ban, there have been numerous adjustments to governmental policies in both the United States and Cuba to address the number of MLB hopefuls leaving Cuba. In 2019, U.S. president Donald Trump and his administration canceled a deal between the MLB and the Cuban Baseball Federation that would have allowed Cuban baseball players to join professional teams in the United States and Canada. This policy change meant that defection became the only option for most Cuban MLB hopefuls.

Major League Baseball, the premier baseball professional organization in the world, is operated from the United States. All of its franchises are located in the United States, except for the Toronto Blue Jays in Canada. That places Cuban baseball players like Happy Oliveros, Carlos Gonzalez, and Victor Baró in a difficult situation governed by political issues. The journey to the MLB is neither short nor easy for any hopeful, regardless of nationality and mobility options. Cuban hopefuls bear the additional burden of considering laws and defection as they pursue their dreams. Sports are political, no matter what anyone may claim. The decision to defect is never easy. There are many risks associated with leaving and attempting to establish residency in a different country. Counting on getting a professional baseball contract in the United States is especially risky for older players.

The migration experiences of these Cuban MLB hopefuls are connected to the larger Cuban diaspora and migratory stories of individuals attempting to leave their home country. In the film, when baseball ends in Costa Rica for Oliveros and Gonzalez, they go on to the United States rather than returning to Cuba. Baseball and the hope of competing in the MLB may be the driving force behind the choices made by these individuals, but attempting to migrate to the United States is not an experience restricted to MLB hopefuls. For instance, Oliveros connects with a cousin and his young family who are also attempting to move to the United States.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**THE ATHLETIC INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX (AIC)**

The athletic industrial complex (AIC) is a term used to describe the intricate role sports play in the economic framework of the United States in the 21st century, often at the expense of the health and wellbeing of athletes. In the film, all three hopefuls, as well as their families, coaches, trainers, and agents, expect high payouts from professional baseball contracts. There is the hope that they will follow in the footsteps of Yasiel Puig, who in 2014 defected and successfully garnered a multi-million dollar contract in the MLB after a dangerous ordeal with drug traffickers. Stories of the successful few like Puig and Yuli Gurriel, the Houston Astros baseball star Oliveros meets in Houston, are more likely to make headlines. Importantly, such stories are often exceptions, not the rule, and they play into the larger myth of exceptionalism that drives people to pursue their dreams despite the reality of potentially limiting conditions.

Most professional sports hopefuls do not make it to the pinnacle of their sport's professional leagues, such as the MLB for baseball. The film states, "In the last five years, hundreds of baseball players have left Cuba. Only six have made it to the majors." Why do Cuban baseball players still try if the odds are so low? As we see in the film, the players believe that they will be among the lucky few. The AIC depends on the labor of players to function, but it also depends on the dreams and aspirations of players and leverages the myth of exceptionalism. The AIC requires individuals to believe they will be the exceptions to the rule if only they work hard enough. However, a baseball industry governed by capitalism leaves little, if any, room for the players' wellbeing, hopes, and humanity. The economic motivation in this system is evidenced by agents seeking 20% cuts from the signing bonuses of these players. For example, after Gus Dominguez, a baseball agent, dismisses Oliveros while he is on the road heading toward the United States, he asks why others didn't sign him for a lower amount. The answer is that signing Oliveros (or other players) for lower paying contracts would not yield sufficient financial benefits, the only aspect that matters in these situations.

Current Cuban and U.S. policies don't allow Cuban MLB prospects to sign contracts with the MLB straight from the island. Like the Cuban system and Cuba's commitment to amateurism in the sports realm, the free market also has serious issues. Professional baseball is caught up in the exploitation (of the labor, lives, and bodies of these migrants). The question of MLB's exploitative practices does not relate solely to Cuban players navigating this one precarious system. The Dominican Republic, where Baró ventures after his unsuccessful attempts to obtain an MLB contract in Costa Rica, has a deeply intertwined relationship with the MLB. All MLB teams operate baseball academies in the Dominican Republic to cultivate and capitalize on young talent. Over the last couple of decades, the Dominican Republic and its academy system have produced some of the top talent in the MLB. The Dominican Republic has produced the most non-U.S. nationality players in the league. However, the system has been rife with controversy and there are horror stories about dubious middle-people, poor living conditions, and a myriad of other issues that ultimately harm MLB hopefuls. And even with the Dominican Republic's relatively high numbers in the MLB,

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

there are countless other players who don't make it.

MENTAL HEALTH AND ATHLETIC IDENTITY

Given the insecurity that characterizes the experience of trying to become a professional athlete in the MLB, one must consider who these athletes are as people. As *The Last Out* depicts, it is neither an easy nor a straightforward process for hopeful Cuban baseball players to make it to the MLB. Those who don't make it vastly outnumber those who do. Frequently it is not just the players who harbor hopes and dreams about going pro—their families are involved, too. In *The Last Out*, all three hopefuls remain connected to families back in Cuba who depend (in many ways) on their making it to the MLB. These players bear a lot of responsibility for themselves and often support their families and communities. This heavy burden of responsibility and the precarious and often dangerous methods for leaving Cuba and navigating the unknown world of professional baseball, dependent upon a middle-person, take a mental toll on the players.

Often when West African soccer players trafficked to Europe don't develop successful careers, the shame of not making it prevents them from seeking assistance or revealing their situations to their families back home. Once sports don't work out, they have few resources to help them achieve their goals or to access the necessary mental health care and social services to support them. In the film, one of the trainers from Costa Rica mentions that some Cuban players are “like a hot potato,” which implies that middle-people should have more responsibility to these players beyond their athletic potential. Pursuing a dream that is shaped by such uncertain forces can cause mental anguish to players, as we see in Gonzalez's departure from the facilities and the filming. Often an individual's athletic identity becomes *the* salient part of their identity, especially when this aspect of their life has been their primary focus and they haven't had the opportunity to explore other aspects of their identity. It is not always easy for athletes to explore other parts of their identities when they are confronted with the realities of carving out a living, especially in the case of Cuban MLB hopefuls. As the film shows, baseball can provide a “legitimate” opportunity and the possibility of leaving Cuba. However, those possibilities do not come with a promise that a player will or can play the sport forever or that the sport will produce the results they desire. The risks, too commonly, are clouded by their pursuing dreams within a structure that was not built for their success.

Chetty, Raj. "Más Allá del Play: Race and the Dominican Baseball Player in Sugar." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 27, no. 1 (2019): 1-116.

DeFreese, J. D., and Jeni Shannon. "The Role of Athletic Identity Foreclosure in the Development of Poor Athlete Mental Health." *Developing and Supporting Athlete Wellbeing* (2021): 239-56.

Esson, James. "Better off at home? Rethinking responses to trafficked West African footballers in Europe." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 3 (2015): 512-530.

Gonzalez, Richard. "[Trump Administration Kills Baseball Deal With Cuba.](#)" *National Public Radio*, April 8, 2019.

Harrison Jr., Louis, et al. "Living the dream or awakening from the nightmare: Race and athletic identity." In *The Education of Black Males in a 'Post-Racial' World*. London: Routledge, 2013. 99-112.

Jamail, Milton H. *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball*. Carbondale: SIU Press, 2000.

Katz, Jesse. "[Escape from Cuba: Yasiel Puig's Untold Journey to the Dodgers,](#)" *LA Mag*, April 14, 2014.

Krall, Katie. "Community, Defection, and equipo Cuba: Baseball under Fidel Castro, 1959-93." *The Baseball Research Journal* 48, no. 2 (2019): 5-10.

Runstedtler, Theresa. "More than just play: Unmasking Black child labor in the athletic industrial complex." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 42, no. 3 (2018): 152-69.

Smith, Earl. *Race, Sport, and the American dream*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS**STARTING THE CONVERSATION**

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask each participant to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What lengths are you willing to go to in order to achieve your dreams?
- Who would you be without your profession?
- Prior to viewing this film, what did you know about the systemic and structural aspects of Major League Baseball? In what ways does this film invite you to reflect on the sport differently?
- Prior to viewing this film, what did you know about Cuban baseball players and their journeys to making it in the major leagues?

CUBAN BASEBALL, DEFECTION, AND MIGRATION

- How can we use the stories of these MLB hopefuls to understand different migration experiences?
- How do politics impact sports and athletes?
- What are the ramifications of Cuban baseball players making the decision to defect?
- What does it mean that Cuban baseball players are making the decision to defect, which entails a hard and dangerous journey?

THE ATHLETIC INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

- Is the Cuban sporting system based primarily on amateurism better or worse than the professional sports system?
- What responsibilities should agents have with regard to international baseball players?
- What makes an athlete believe they will play professionally against the low odds?
- What role does the media play in leading youth and their families to believe they will go professional when the odds of actually going professional are so low?
- Do people play sports for enjoyment or to generate money?

MENTAL HEALTH AND ATHLETIC IDENTITY

- Who helps athletes navigate their mental health?
- What happens to athletes who don't make it?
- What resources should be made available to athletes who are dealing with mental health issues?
- Are athletes entertainers or people?
- What would you do if you had been working for something for so long and all of a sudden it stopped?
- Why would Victor Baró keep trying to obtain a professional baseball contract after witnessing the failure of his close friends to do so?
- How do you explore different parts of your identity?

[Healthy Children: “Mental Health in Teen Athletes”](#)

Resource for supporting mental health amongst teenage athletes.

[Mission 89](#)

Mission 89 is a research, education, and advocacy organization that fights the exploitation of young athletes through social and economic transformation.

[NCAA: “Mental Health Educational Resources”](#)

The NCAA Sport Science Institute is a leader in providing health and safety resources to college athletes, coaches, athletics administrators and campus partners. Together with leading medical organizations, behavioral health centers and content matter experts, the SSI provides educational resources for member schools to promote and support the health and well-being of student-athletes.

[Team USA: “Mental Health”](#)

Health services, resources, and tools for promoting and supporting athletes’ mental health

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Discussion Guide Writer: Javier Wallace, PhD

Javier is the “Master Storyteller.” He is the Race and Sport Postdoctoral Associate in the Department of African & African American Studies at Duke University. He completed his Ph.D. at The University of Texas at Austin. Javier’s research revolves around race, class, gender, labor migration, nationality, and transnationalism of athletes from the U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean. Javier’s first book project, *Sueños del Norte: Black Panamanian Hoop Dreams & the Realities of Basketball Trafficking*, was selected as a top topic on Afro-Latin studies for the Master Mamolen Clark Dissertation Workshop, part of the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University. Javier’s work and research have been supported by fellowships and grants, including Joe Arbena Latin American Sport History Grant, The Latinx Project at New York University among others. Javier earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Florida A&M University, one of the country’s premier HBCUs, where he also played offensive lineman for the Rattler Football Team. He is of U.S. and Panamanian heritage and has served as athletic director and physical educator in the Republic of Panama. Javier is also the founder of Black Austin Tours. Additionally, he is the co-founder of the social entrepreneurial projects—AfroLatinx Travel and BlackPackas. In all endeavors through curation and narrative storytelling, Javier seeks to amplify the themes explored in both his lived experiences and academic research.

Discussion Guide Producer:

Courtney B. Cook, Phd | Education Manager, POV

Thanks to all who reviewed this guide:

Natalie Danford, Copyeditor