

FABIOLA SANTIAGO SEPTEMBER 28, 2016 9:05 PM

Adiós, Joseíto, beloved son of Cuba, baseball and exile



◀ 1 of 4 ▶



BY FABIOLA SANTIAGO
fsantiago@miamiherald.com

Miami said goodbye to its fallen baseball star with a dose of *cubanía* as heavy as our hearts.

José Fernández was — on his last ride through the city that embraced him — “Joseíto,” the boy who sold onion, garlic and tomatoes on the ramshackle streets of a Cuban town, and against every imaginable obstacle, rose to become a baseball star in the United States.



Fans say goodbye as Jose Fernandez funeral procession leaves Marlins Park

Fans react to the death of Jose Fernandez during the funeral procession for the Marlins' pitcher on Sept. 28, 2016

Jose Iglesias - El Nuevo Herald

Cuban-American newsmen choked up on live television Wednesday when they called him that during the farewell — *nuestro Joseíto*. The waitresses who had served him at La Carreta wept as they lined up for a cafecito salute along Bird Road when his hearse drove by — and stopped. In a city where emotions easily run high, this was nothing we had ever seen before.

ADVERTISING

From his teammates to his fans, Miamians from all walks of life mourned his loss as if Fernández were family.

“He was like everyone’s son,” said Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón. “His life was cut short but his light will never dim. ... And for me, his journey to freedom was emblematic of the collective pain of all of us who became men and women overnight in our teens.”

Fernández fled Cuba on a boat at 15, his fourth try to leave the country and pursue his dreams in freedom.

Sure, his pitcher’s arm was prodigious and, at 24, he seemed destined for Hall of Fame greatness, his fans proudly boast. But it was his human qualities that made Fernández stand out from the rest: A love of family that kept him grounded in his roots and humble despite the millionaire paycheck. A love not only of Cuba but also of the adopted country he fully embraced, becoming a citizen last year.

The night he died he was wearing a T-shirt with the American flag.

Yet his loss is most poignant for the Cuban community. His death is another sad chapter in the long history of the Cuban exile, marked by loss and separation, one exodus after another, and by the rewards of bittersweet successes, too.

If, in our six-decade history, Jorge Mas Canosa was the political leader regaled with a statesman’s funeral in 1997, and salsa queen Celia Cruz represented our culture and brought thousands of mourners to her vigil at Miami’s Freedom Tower in 2003, Fernández marked yet another generation and another entry, sports.

At Marlins Park, players in white T-shirts gathered around the black hearse carrying Fernández, arms stretched as if embracing the beloved teammate who died in a tragic boating accident.



Jersey placed on Jose Fernandez's casket

As the casket sat in the hearse Jose Fernandez's family, weeping uncontrollably, placed one of his orange Marlins' jerseys and his 2016 All-Star Game jersey on top of the casket.

Andre C. Fernandez - Miami Herald

They hugged Fernández's mother, clad in black and inconsolable. Then, they saw emerge from the black limousine the petite figure of Fernández's beloved *abuela* Olga, who wore his jersey, No. 16, over black slacks. They sobbed. Abuela introduced her grandson to the game as a child, and after they were separated, heard him play in Miami on a radio from her rooftop in Santa Clara. They were reunited three years ago. The Cuban government wouldn't let her leave, but relented after Marlins owner Jeffrey Loria interceded on her behalf at a time when, behind the scenes, there were efforts by both countries to move toward a thawing of Cold War relations.

After a last ride around Marlins Park, the funeral procession headed to the bayside shrine of Our Lady of Charity, Cuba's patron saint, where Fernández's body arrived to canticles to the virgin for a holy water blessing of the casket, condolences, and prayer.

The spiritual home of exiles, La Ermita is a refuge for those who seek solace and a connection to the homeland.

But the stop at La Carreta was a touching tribute to Fernández's jovial character. It was the place where he loved to hang out with his people and devour home cooking. A *cafécito* salute to a fallen hero in Westchester, a Miami enclave where working-class exiles moved when they had done just a little better — and, in the process of living, turned their nostalgia for the lost homeland into cultural inheritance.

Oh, what a Miami story he was a part of.

Adiós, Joseíto, 1992-2016, beloved son of Cuba, baseball and exile.

Fabiola Santiago: fsantiago@miamiherald.com, @fabiolasantiago

RELATED CONTENT

- Farewell to Fernandez, a Marlins tribute
-



MORE FABIOLA SANTIAGO

YOU MAY LIKE

Sponsored Links by Taboola

She Had No Idea Why the Crowd Was Cheering

LifehackLane

After Losing 200lbs Mama June is Actually Gorgeous

Detonate

19 Rare Woodstock Photos That Will Leave You Breathless

History Hole

Man afraid of flying dies on first flight

OddChatter

COMMENTS

4 Comments

Sort by Oldest