

Coast Guard crew reflects on time with Yasiel Puig during attempt to defect to U.S.

Tue, Jul 2, 2013 9:24 AM EDT



Jun 27, 2013; Los Angeles, CA, USA; Los Angeles Dodgers right fielder Yasiel Puig (66) reacts after the game against the Philadelphia Phillies at Dodger Stadium. The Dodgers defeated the Phillies

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It was time for a boat chase, the sort they craved. Months idling on the open seas left those aboard the *Vigilant*, a United States Coast Guard cutter, thirsting for action, and in the middle of April 2012, here it was. Somewhere in the Windward Passage between [Cuba](#) and Haiti, a lookout on the top deck spotted a speedboat in the distance. "I've got a contact," he said, and for Chris Hoschak, the officer on deck, that meant one thing: Get a team ready.

He summoned Colin Burr, who had just qualified to drive the Coast Guard's Over the Horizon-IV boats that hunt bogeys in open water space. Before boarding, Burr and four others mounted up: body armor, gun belts and a cache of guns in case it was drug smugglers, which everyone figured because go-fast boats tend to traffic product instead of humans.

The chase didn't last long. Maybe five or 10 minutes. Turned out the boat wasn't all that fast. Still, when it stopped, Burr approached with caution. Their assumption was wrong. There were no drugs. Just people, a dozen or so, attempting a defection from Cuba. The driver was an American. So was his partner. An older man was onboard. He was the leader of the passengers, most of whom looked in their early 20s, including another man who drew special attention. He was much bigger than the rest, dressed in a raggedy shirt, shorts and flip-flops.

Burr drove the group back to the *Vigilant*, three or four at a time. They ascended a 20-foot ladder, where Hoschak and others awaited to start processing them. The standard procedure for all migrants, as the Coast Guard refers to them, is to move to the stern of the boat, where they're frisked, given wristbands, white jumpsuits, a shower and some food. Some migrants are combative, knowing the Coast Guard almost always returns them to the place from which they so desperately want to escape, and others say nothing. This group was cordial and cooperative. When a processing officer approached the big man, the first thing he asked was for his name.

"Yasiel," he said.

One of the most amazing things about [Yasiel Puig's rapid rise to superstardom over the last month](#) with the [Los Angeles](#)

because he did. The first 21 years of his life remain almost a complete secret. Part of Puig's intrigue stems from that mystery. Baseball demigods don't just appear out of nowhere. Even Cubans who defect arrive with some sort of a backstory. Puig is an anomaly: a burgeoning legend without a past.

Except for the one those on the Vigilant now know.

Every year, thousands of refugees escape from [Cuba](#) to make a new life in the United States. They are doctors and lawyers and laborers and students, people who yearn for freedom and are willing to risk their lives for it. Since January 2000, at least 200 Cubans have died trying to defect, according to Gabe Somma, a public-affairs officer for the Coast Guard. In that same time, [Coast Guard cutters have interdicted more than 20,000 others](#) before they made it to the U.S.



The Vigilant, a United States Coast Guard cutter. (U.S. Coast Guard)

The Vigilant has intercepted hundreds of boats and thousands of people. From drug seizures to enforcing fishing laws, the 77 men and women on the 210-foot ship are the shepherds of the Southeast, patrolling the waters for illegal activity. Migrant enforcement represents one of the most conflicting parts of their job. Coasties recognize they're denying liberties to people who no longer can stomach living on an island stuck in the 1960s after the U.S. embargo. It is a job they believe somebody must do, even when it means returning to Cuba a baseball player whose potential seems limitless, especially after a debut month in which he batted .436 with seven home runs and 16 RBIs. The last player with as many as 44 hits in his first major league month: Joe DiMaggio in 1936.

While the Coast Guard declined to release specific information about the interdiction of Puig's boat, conversations with six men aboard the Vigilant at the time gave Yahoo! Sports an in-depth look into a nearly two-week sliver of Puig's life. Though this was not his final voyage, it offers the greatest insight yet of his tortuous journey to Dodger Stadium.

"He stood out from the group," Hoschak said. "The conditions he was in on that boat were terrible. He's got his stuff in a garbage bag. Not really enough food. You can tell."

As Hoschak dropped off the migrant boat along with the two Americans at the nearest safe haven in Haiti, word began to filter around the Vigilant that Puig was a ballplayer. Two months earlier, Yoenis Cespedes had signed for \$36 million with the Oakland A's after defecting from Cuba. And the baseball fans on the cutter heard about the recent defection of outfielder Jorge Soler, who would secure a \$30 million deal with the Cubs. Puig was just a name. He looked the part, but so do plenty of others who can't hit a fastball once it reaches 90 mph.

"We all heard he was a baseball player," Burr said, "but none of us knew who he even was or where he had played."

Curiosity finally got the best of Carlos Torres. He was the Vigilant's interpreter – the liaison between Puig's party and the security team that watched the migrants 24 hours a day – and he wanted to better understand the man with whom he had chatted with for a few days as the Vigilant held the group while waiting for Cuban instructions of when and where to repatriate it.

So on April 18, 2012, Torres punched "[Yasiel Puig](#)" into a search engine on a Vigilant computer and perused the results. He clicked on [a Feb. 11 post at Camden Chat](#), a Baltimore Orioles fan site that was discussing whether the O's should sign Cespedes. About three-quarters of the way down the comments, a man with the handle "gio2chat" scoffed at Cespedes. He preferred a kid named Yasiel Puig who had thrived during the 2010-11 season of the Serie Nacional, Cuba's major leagues.

matched. Puig wasn't just some kid with delusions of baseball grandeur. Long before he enamored Los Angeles, he was making fans in the open water. Torres printed the picture and brought it to the deck where the migrants were situated. He showed it to Puig and the older gentlemen.

"Their faces lit up," Torres said.

Those small moments sustained Puig. Life as a migrant on a cutter is not glamorous. Because the Coast Guard never knows how many boats it may interdict on any mission, there are no rooms for migrants. Puig and his party spent 24 hours a day outside on a deck with a tarp to shade them from the sun and one wool blanket to keep them warm. They had access to bathrooms, enough water to keep them from dehydrating and three meals a day, almost always rice and beans. In addition to the older man, Puig traveled with a woman to whom he seemed particularly close and a handful of other friends. One was sick and didn't have much of an appetite. Puig got the extra food. Nobody wanted their 6-foot-3, 245-pound meal ticket to wither away.



The Coast Guard's Over the Horizon-IV boat that is used for pursuit. (U.S. Coast Guard)

Torres' comfort level with the group grew, and Puig started to tell him about his life in [Cuba](#). During the 2011 World Cup in Rotterdam, Puig said, he and another player tried to defect. Left-handed pitcher Gerardo Concepcion left successfully and signed for \$6 million with the Chicago Cubs. Puig was caught, and Cuba banned him from playing, a story that dovetailed with the post on Camden Chat.

Puig asked about life in the United States, whether Torres had a big house in Florida, where the Vigilant is stationed, and what life was like where the government couldn't control its people. It was so novel to him, a 21-year-old who knew nothing else.

On the good days, Puig would play cards with his friends and wax on about baseball. His older friend said he was better than Cespedes, that one day he was going to play in the major leagues, and maybe Torres could be his agent, take his small slice of the booty that awaited.

"*Boricua*," Puig said, knowing Torres was Puerto Rican, "somebody is going to take a chance on me, and I'll be rich someday. That someday will be pretty soon."

Puig was so sure of himself, even though this wasn't the first time he'd been denied. Cuba had not broken him yet, his talent and naivete a potent enough brew to fuel another try, and another, and another. If it meant surviving under the tarp on slop and sleeping on a pebbled deck and waking up at 0700 hours with the rest of the Coasties, that was merely a precursor to his eventual success.

And yet he knew he was going back to Cuba, and that the authorities would again find him derelict in duty to his country. Even if Cuba's immigration laws were thawing and the country was allowing more and more people to leave, recidivism was especially frowned upon. They could trump up some charges on him and send him away. He'd heard of other players who went to jail for years and lost their careers.

One night, the gravity of the situation depressed Puig. Torres could tell the toll his impending return to Cuba was taking, so he went to his



looped in perfect cursive with his number for Cienfuegos: "Y Puig 14."

Almost two weeks after the Vigilant interdicted Puig's boat, it parked just outside of Cuban water space. Cuba was sending a boat to bring the migrants home. The Coasties thanked them for their conversation, their companionship, their attitude, their appreciation – for understanding this wasn't personal but a policy implemented more than half a century earlier, when the world was a different place. Puig and his friends gathered their belongings and walked toward the ladder. For some migrants, it is the last glimpse they'll ever get of something American.

"I remember as they were leaving, I said [to Puig], 'Are we going to see you again?' " Hoschak said. "He just smiled."

Less than two months later, Yasiel Puig landed somewhere in Mexico. Nobody will say where. Or how he got there. Or who brought him. Or whether his friends from the Vigilant came as well. One story, maybe apocryphal, maybe not, goes like this: Mexican drug smugglers ferried Puig to Cancun and held him with the understanding they would receive a cut of his contract. Puig has not confirmed this. He has not said anything about his defection, any of his previous attempts or his life in Cuba.

When asked about his time aboard the Vigilant, Puig declined comment through a Dodgers spokesman, other than to say: "The story is completely true."

He has told it to others, too. During a recent conversation with his agent, Jaime Torres – no relation to Carlos – Puig recalled the Vigilant with fondness. It was one of his many defection attempts – six, or eight, or who the hell knows. Puig lost track.

"He told me a funny story about this," Jaime Torres said. "He had attempted to leave from one particular place. By the third time, the police officer begged him to leave from another place because [Puig] was going to get him in trouble."

For the last 20 years, Torres has been a lifeline for Cuban expats. He fell in love with Cuban baseball at the 1987 Pan Am Games in Indianapolis, and the more he learned, the more he felt compelled to help. While players in the Serie Nacional earn a nice living in Cuba, they make pennies compared to what they could in the major leagues. Even though Cuba has allowed star outfielder Alfredo Despaigne to play in the Mexican League this summer, Torres said the government will garnish perhaps 80 percent of the money he makes there.

When Torres met Puig in Mexico last June, he said, Puig "was scared. I remember he asked me: 'Please help me. Help me get to the big leagues.'" Torres had scored the first big-money deal for a Cuban player in 2002 with Jose Contreras' four-year, \$36 million contract, and he was determined to beat that with Puig. He didn't have much time. Starting July 2, new Major League Baseball rules would limit the amount of money available for international players under 23 years old to less than \$5 million. Torres announced June 19 that Puig had defected successfully, and soon thereafter he secured permanent residency that allowed Puig a license to play in the major leagues, something that normally takes months.

Scouts flocked to Mexico. Puig disappointed most of them. He wasn't in great shape. He hadn't played in a year. This wasn't Cespedes, who was crushing major league pitching as a rookie. Many saw Puig as another in a long line of Cuban players whose hype exceeded their talent.

On June 28, Puig signed a seven-year, \$42 million deal with the Dodgers. And the entire baseball world thought they'd lost



The deck where migrants are held on the Vigilant.
(Special to Yahoo! Sports)

television screen: Puig had made it. He had made it, and he was rich, and everything he told the Coasties had come true.

"From a law-enforcement perspective, you're talking about somebody who's illegal, and it's hard to sympathize," Hoschak said. "But when you hear about somebody who has the will to get where they want to go and make it happen, it's a great story. I don't look at this negatively. He's an entertainer. And he's doing what he was put on this planet to do."

Hoschak sees the box scores and hears Vin Scully, who called his first game for the Dodgers when Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella and Duke Snider were playing, practically deify Puig. And it edifies Hoschak because this job he's done since he was 19 years old, the one that leaves his back locking up all the time, allowed him to know baseball's greatest enigma.

Others on the Vigilant don't hesitate to take ownership of Puig, either. During his change-of-command ceremony June 14 when he ceded his captaincy of the Vigilant, Cmdr. James C. Estramonte joked about how one of the migrants is now making more money than any Coastie could imagine. Carlos Torres still tells stories to the new men and women on the cutter. "Yasiel was part of the Vigilant's history, and we are all happy for it," he said.

When Puig Fever seems to crescendo, he finds a way to spike it a little higher. He logged his first four-hit game Sunday. On [his Instagram page](#), he's asking people to vote for him for the All-Star Game, even though his name is nowhere on the ballot. He's not even supposed to be here. The Dodgers wanted to let him mature more at Double-A before summoning him. His baserunning was too shoddy, his fielding immature, his assimilation slow to the life he so coveted in America, as it is for almost all Cubans.

Injury and serendipity brought him to Los Angeles, and the All-Star talk isn't far-fetched. Puig is addictive. He washes away all of the flaws in his game with a cocktail of aptitude and panache that plays to the sensibilities of baseball junkies and neophytes alike. Even if June is an aberration, it speaks to the power of one player, the power of a dream realized.

Hoschak, Burr and some other Coasties have talked about taking a trip to Chicago or St. Louis at the beginning of August. The Dodgers swing through the Midwest that week. Hoschak is stationed in Charleston, S.C., Burr in Annapolis, Md., and all it will take is a flight and a few tickets to see him again. They want to congratulate him for making it. And so they'll get to the ballpark during batting practice, and they'll slink up to the railing, and they'll lean over it, and they'll hope he'll see their faces, and in case he doesn't, they'll know exactly what to do.

"Yasiel," they'll say. "Yasiel."

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In pursuing his dream of coming to America, a lot of people had Yasiel Puig's back. (Getty Images)