

Bidding now open on Cuban prospect Yoenis Cespedes

By Jorge L. Ortiz, USA TODAY

The increasing dominance of pitching the last couple of years, the result at least in part of baseball's enhanced anti-doping policy, has put a premium on the now-rare commodity of power hitting.

Witness Prince Fielder's king's ransom of a contract.

Yoenis Cespedes won't come close to that nine-year, \$214 million deal, but rest assured whatever sum he lands will be considerably more than he ever could have dreamt of growing up in Cuba.

The power-hitting outfield prospect was declared a free agent by MLB on Wednesday after securing residency in the Dominican Republic, meaning the bidding for his services can now begin.

Cespedes, who told reporters in the Dominican Republic he has drawn the most interest from the White Sox, Cubs, Marlins, Orioles, Tigers and Indians, is expected to receive a larger deal than the \$30.25 million contract left-handed countryman Aroldis Chapman got from the Reds two years ago.

MORE: Cuba's Cespedes, Japan's Darvish draw buzz

The newly free-spending Marlins have made no secret of their desire to have Cespedes, 26, patrol the outfield in the ballpark they'll be inaugurating in April in the heart of Miami's Little Havana.

There have been conflicting reports regarding Cespedes' desire to join a club in a market with such a large Cuban population, which could provide a sense of familiarity but also added pressure for a player just turning pro.

That hasn't deterred the Marlins.

"We're going to try as hard as we can (to sign him)," team president David Samson told Miami radio station 790 The Ticket. "With that said, there's other teams. Maybe some teams thought they were getting Prince Fielder for four years, and all of a sudden they weren't."

Whichever team lands Cespedes (pronounced SAYS-peh-des) would be well advised to exercise some patience and give him time to get acclimated to both the U.S. and pro baseball, preferably in the minors.

Cespedes, who is built like a running back at 6 feet, 215 pounds, did not look good during his recent stint in the Dominican Winter League, batting .143 with a home run and 10 strikeouts in 35 at-bats for Aguilas Cibaenas. Then again, it would be unreasonable to expect a hitter who hasn't seen competitive pitching in months to thrive right away in a high-level pro league that's akin to at least Class AAA in the U.S.

More than that brief sample, teams figure to go on the observations of their scouts and evaluations from his appearances in international competitions. (He had a .458 batting average and two homers in 24 at-bats during the 2009 World Baseball Classic.)

His numbers in Cuba were awfully impressive as well. In eight seasons, Cespedes compiled a .319 batting average with a .585 slugging percentage, and he led the 90-game National Series last season with 33 homers and 99 RBI, both career highs.

However, longtime Cuban baseball observer and author Peter Bjarkman points out that in the hitter-friendly Cuban league a .300 average is just that, average, and that Cespedes played in a small home ballpark known to favor sluggers. He also batted third in a loaded lineup with lots of protection.

Bjarkman does give Cespedes a strong endorsement, though, even while noting he doesn't match the hitting skills of other current Cuban stars like Alfredo Despaigne, Frederich Cepeda or Yulieski Gourriel.

"Cespedes is a legitimate five-tool prospect," Bjarkman wrote in his blog, baseballdecuba.com. "Boasting tremendous power, great speed, a quick bat, considerable outfield range and a powerful throwing arm, he is unquestionably a legitimate big league prospect and easily one of the best athletes to come out of Cuba since Kendry Morales and Alexei Ramirez."

That should be enticing enough to get teams to line up with checkbooks at the ready.