



DRSEA INFORMER

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Fiebre Del Oro Dominicano (Dominican Gold Rush) – The stampede for baseball talent in the Dominican Republic never ceases to amaze me as Major League Baseball and its teams spend \$100 million a year to identify and develop talent where there is 98 percent collateral damage. It is like planting 100 apples trees, but picking the fruit from only two, and yet, the orchard is considered a good business venture.

Actually, Dominican baseball is predicated upon picking unripe fruit, signing 16-year-old green apples to professional contracts, while at the same time MLB requires players in the United States to complete high school or turn 18 before signing. Further, if a U.S. prospect chooses to attend college, he must complete his junior year or turn 21 to be draft eligible.

Why then is there a rush to sign Dominicans at 16, but Americans are required to ripen at least two more years? Add to that the fact that unlike the National Basketball Association or the National Football League, drafted baseball players very seldom make an immediate impact, instead spending years in the minors to further perfect their skills. Rarely does any player make it to the majors while still a teenager.



Young Dominican boys chase the dream

Those in the know tell me that baseball's talent prognosticators estimate that it takes at least five years to develop talent prepared to play at the major league level, meaning an 18-year-old from Kalamazoo will be at least 23 before he is a MLB rookie.

I am told that the same formula does not apply in the Dominican Republic, where players don't have the advantage of a well established development system like in the United States where there is Little League, Babe Ruth, Pony League, American Legion, school teams and a host of other

organized competition. While there are leagues in the Dominican Republic, they are not always easily accessible, and the training offered is generally not as sophisticated.

That is why everyone is in such a hurry to pluck unripened fruit off the Dominican baseball tree. Conventional wisdom is that the sooner the fruit is picked, the sooner the ripening process begins, and the sooner the fruit can develop its full flavor. While they are very talented, Dominican players do not experience the same baseball pipelines as their American counterparts and need more seasoning, more time to develop, more time to become major league ready, according to the experts. So, it is considered advantageous to grab them as early as possible; “Teams would take them at 14 if they could,” one insider told me.

That gold rush for talent undoubtedly is what created many of the problems plaguing Dominican baseball today. Players lie about their ages to make them more attractive to teams and take steroids to become bigger, faster and stronger than normally developed 16-year-olds. And *buscones*, the talent scouts who search for and deliver prospects to teams, are more than willing to cheat to get their young clients signed so they can siphon off huge portions of their bonuses.

Among the possibilities being considered in the reform movement now taking place in Dominican baseball are raising the signing age to 18 and subjecting players to an international draft. I don't think either is a good idea; that would upset the Dominican baseball ecosystem. There is unilateral agreement that the system has problems, but raising the signing age or adopting an international draft would destroy Dominican baseball, the good with the bad.

Given the acknowledged lack of a quality public education in the Dominican Republic, a multitude of young boys drops out of school to pursue the dream of baseball. Many of these 16-year-old prospects receive discipline, direction and purpose through baseball that they would not otherwise obtain. Baseball could better serve them by providing educational opportunities as well; the DRSEA's goal is to be one of the educational options available to Dominican baseball players.

I also think that one of the flaws in the current system is the devaluation of players 19 years old and above. These players are considered over the hill, but lie about their age to regain consideration, which many of them receive. Last year, baseball teams voided more than \$15 million in signing bonuses after age discrepancies were discovered.

It seems to me that some of the age fraud could be avoided if this so-called over-the-hill gang could get a legitimate shot at the stardom all Dominican baseball players crave. Logic dictates that if a 19-year-old believes he still has a chance to reach his dream, he will be less likely to lie about his age.

Sure, you would still be getting what many consider a diamond in the rough who faces the same developmental timetable as a 16-year-old, but the upside is a more mature, more focused 19-year-old man as opposed to a 16-year-old boy.

Why not have baseball teams in the Dominican Republic offer a combine similar to what the National Football League uses to evaluate talent prior to its annual draft, but only for those players 19 and over? Once, twice a year bring this Geritol generation to a location for workouts to assess their skills; make those workouts open to all teams who can then select promising players directly or via a special draft. These players can easily be identified by the baseball's expanded Scouting Bureau that now covers all of Latin America.

Baseball has already taken several steps in addressing age and identity fraud, including the use of fingerprinting of young Dominican prospects as was first advocated in the **DRSEA INFORMER** a year ago. Giving those over 19 one last shot at the gold can only help eliminate their need to lie about when they were born.

Transiciones (Transitions) – Life is a series of transitions, moving from one stage to another, and such has been the case with the DRSEA as it evolves almost daily. A major step in that evolution took place recently when we held a board retreat in the Dominican Republic.

We had been talking about such a gathering for more than a year; board meetings have been carried out monthly via conference call, but there was a need to have our board meet face to face and collectively hammer out a more comprehensive plan to move forward and turn the dream to reality.

It was heartening to have a number of board members travel from the United States to join those of us living in the Dominican Republic for a couple of intensive days of strategic planning. We were also joined by several others who expressed interest in joining the board, including a lawyer who has written extensively about Dominican baseball and an educator who actually spent time teaching English at a baseball academy in the Dominican Republic.

The retreat was held at the Saint George School, a prominent private school in Santo Domingo; the president's daughter is a student. I happen to know the academic dean – the sister of a board member – and she was gracious enough to acquire space for us. The school, complete with computers, Smart Boards and other technology, is an example of what can be accomplished in the Dominican Republic when there is a commitment to education.

The retreat focused on fund raising, athletic and academic curriculum, and organizational development to strengthen the operations of the DRSEA and make us strong now and in the future. We also discussed expanding the board further to include other people with strong skills and resources to help us move forward.

The retreat also featured a public forum on baseball in the Dominican Republic. A recent **TIME** magazine article that quoted me also quoted Sandy Alderson, the man MLB sent to the Dominican Republic to address age and identity fraud, steroid usage and excesses by *buscones*, as saying that while he is sensitive to Dominican concerns, “This is an American company, this is an American institution functioning in this country, and there's no reason why someone like myself shouldn't be here.

“People are making a lot of money based on a system that is flawed. And they don't want to see change; it's as simple as that. From my point of view, change is coming. Whether they accept it or not.”

The DRSEA is of the firm belief that the baseball reform movement must include Dominicans in the process, in the planning and execution of that reform – or the reform will be met with opposition, which is already gathering storm.

While it is never our intent to position ourselves as an adversary of Major League Baseball, the public forum was our contribution to the debate on reform and voices rang clear for more Dominican involvement. We had panelists that included César Gerónimo, a former big leaguer who is on the DRSEA board, and Rubert Johan, a student at Saint George who has had two tryouts with pro teams but is intent on going to college in the United States on a baseball scholarship. He is the prototype of the student the DRSEA wants in its classrooms and baseball fields.



Harold Méndez, Rubert Johan and César Gerónimo

The debate also included a member of the Dominican government who advocated that education has to be at the center of the reform movement, as well as other Dominicans who freely expressed their opinion about the future of Dominican baseball and their right to help determine that path. Major League Baseball had two representatives in attendance as well.

We are hoping that more public debates on the subject will be held, and that MLB will attend with open ears – and maybe hold one of its own. Dominicans I know openly admit that the system has issues, but since that system operates in their country they believe they must be part of the solution. I think the **TIME** article, written by Sean Gregory, is a great porthole on Dominican baseball and encourage its reading:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2004099,00.html>.



Some of those attending the DRSEA public forum on Dominican baseball

Post Retreat - After the retreat, I headed to a resort in Boca Chica with my DRSEA co-founder and dear friend, Harold Méndez, for a little R&R. Harold has been with me since the beginning of the DRSEA, when it was just a kernel of an idea we developed after seeing the overwhelming need to improve opportunities for Dominican baseball players who, if they fail at baseball, have few options. And fail they do. Gregory's article pointed out that over the past decade just 2 percent of Dominican prospects who signed with teams have made it to the majors. With a 98 percent failure rate, those rejects deserve a chance at a good life outside of baseball and the DRSEA believes education is the cornerstone of that chance.

Harold and I become fast friends as soon as we met and we worked together on other projects in the Dominican Republic before embarking on creating the DRSEA. Because we are so focused on our goal, we rarely argue, preferring to put our energy into the dream. It has been a passion for both of us and makes me secure in the belief that one day soon the DRSEA will be a world class institution that will produce Dr. Sammy Sosas.

Harold and I spent most of our time at the resort reviewing the board retreat and refining what we know we need to do to make the DRSEA a reality, with much of that blueprint coming out of the retreat. The future of the DRSEA is bright and shining. ***UN PASO MAS Y LLAGAMOS.***

After Harold headed to the airport for his return home, I walked from the plush resort to the other end of Boca Chica, to the public beach to meet my friend Jose and some of his friends – now my

friends as well – for an afternoon at *la playa*. Jose is my Dominican equivalent of Harold; a good friend whose company I always enjoy and who I know always has my back.

Given that the Dominican Republic is an island, the beach is a natural retreat for most of the population and Dominicans have a way of turning a day at the beach into a massive party. Chairs, tables and beach umbrellas are available for a nominal fee as hundreds brave the blazing sun or seek refuge under acres of tents. Vendors sell a variety of food, including plates of whole fried fish and mountains of chicken with sides of rice and sweet plantains. Rum and beer wash down the rich food and cleanse the palate for more. Salsa and merengue blare over loud speakers as people dance and sway to the rhythm of the music.

I have always been genuinely impressed by the generosity of Dominican people; even the poorest share what they have. On this day, a man scavenging the beach for empty bottles is given a sandwich and soda. When his crippled hands cannot grasp both at once, he is offered a chair at a table so he can take his time.

We while away the afternoon eating, drinking and smoking cigars as we laugh and joke and enjoy the refreshing ocean water. I notice that the water seems warmer than that just a mile away at the resort I left earlier but blame it on the hot mid afternoon sun that burns overhead.



Public beach in Boca Chica

At some point I feel the urge to go to the bathroom and ask its whereabouts. Imagine my astonishment when I am told that if I only have to pee, to simply wade in the water and do my business. I am suddenly struck by the possibility of exactly what might be contributing to the warm water temperatures. I decide to skip the ocean for the rest of the day.

In the late afternoon we pack up to head back to Santo Domingo, about a half hour away. Jose had promised that we would have a vehicle at our disposal and would not have to ride back on one of the rickety buses that shuttle people between Boca Chica and the capital. But I should have run for the hills when I saw the small pickup truck that was going to be our transport, and run even faster when several of the men had to push the truck to get it started. Maybe I had been in sun too long to listen to my instincts.

I was utterly shocked when 18 people – yes, 18 – piled into the truck. Five in the cab and 13 in the bed! Fortunately – or unfortunately – four of them were children, mercifully innocent to the incumbent dangers of our folly.

Compounding my disbelief was the fact that several people sat atop the huge propane tank/portable bomb that fuels the truck. As we careen down the highway, the driver hits the brakes hard several times to avoid a collision. At 6'5, my cramped legs are aching, but the hard railing of the truck quickly cuts off my circulation and my lower extremities go numb.

I rode in silence, contemplating the resulting carnage if we crash and wonder if we will set some sort of Dominican record for fatalities. My concern must have shown on my face as Jose asks me

what is wrong. “You know what I am thinking,” I tell him, and we both laugh as we say in unison, “Only in the Dominican Republic!”

Diversos Movimientos (Different Strokes) – One of my life lessons was gained the summer I spent during college working for my uncle, who at the time was a professional house painter. Uncle Donald was well known in the community for the quality work he did and there were homes he had painted twice, sometimes three times over the course of years.

My uncle was a stickler for starting work on time, putting in a full day, and doing things the right way. Brush strokes had to be a certain way to apply paint evenly, drop cloths had to be laid precisely to catch drips, and you always, always cleaned up at the end of the day, including brushes and rollers, some he had had for years. “Take care of your tools,” Uncle Donald would say, “and your tools will take care of you.”



Uncle Donald back in his painting days

Painting was hard toil in the summer heat but I respected the work and the results; there was a certain degree of pride that came along with doing the job right and I have always had great appreciation for Uncle Donald for what he taught me that summer.

But knowing the proper way to paint has led to a sense of aggravation as I watch that same craft performed in the Dominican Republic. As always, I do not criticize, I observe.

I am watching a man paint my apartment as he stands barefoot atop a plastic bucket, reaching over his head to paint the walls and ceiling eaves. The bucket creaks under his weight; there is no drop cloth. And when he stands – again barefoot – on my kitchen counter to paint the wall above the kitchen cabinets, I cringe. My American mentality – my experience with Uncle Donald – tells me this would be so much easier, so much more efficient with a ladder, with a drop cloth, with a paint edger. And maybe shoes?

But I am not in the United States, and while I cringe, the apartment did get painted. Not to the standards Uncle Donald would approve, of course, but it takes different strokes to move the world. Hopefully, someone will come and scrape the paint drips off the floor.

Uncle D turns 89 this month and while he no longer climbs the sides of houses to paint them, he shows no signs of slowing down. He and his younger girlfriend – she is in her 70s – are making a journey to the Dominican Republic for a week at a resort. I plan on spending some time with him; no way he is going to make it to my island and me not see him.

My uncle has always been impressive. He picked up a tennis racket in his 50s when he was told it was a sport he could play the rest of his life - and to impress a lady friend. It turned into a second career. He took to giving lessons to local kids, earning the unofficial title of “guardian angel” to several generations who could never have afforded conventional instruction. Tennis became his passion and he would string up nets wherever he could, often between two chairs.

He founded the Plainfield (NJ) Tennis Council, which provides tennis instructional programs for middle and high school students. He coached the Plainfield High School tennis team for 30 years, from 1979 until last year. When it came time to name Plainfield's state-of-the-art tennis facility, there was only one person mentioned: The Donald Van Blake Tennis Center, completed in 2001, has 16 courts, shade shelters, bleachers and drinking fountains, and has received an Outstanding Facility Award from the United States Tennis Association.



Uncle D (left) and cousin David

I once was sitting in my favorite cigar shop in Santo Domingo when an American entered and started a conversation, saying he was from Plainfield. I asked him if he had ever heard of my uncle, and he said he knew the tennis courts well and had even played on them.

"Isn't your uncle dead," he asked. Hardly.

In 2008, Uncle Donald was inducted into the USTA's Eastern Tennis Hall of Fame.

The main hope of a nation lies in the proper education of its youth. - Erasmus

Charles S. Farrell

DRSEA Contact Information in the Dominican Republic

Address: Calle 19 de Marzo, #103, Suite 305, Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Phone: 829-505-2991

Website: www.drsea.org

Myspace: Myspace.com/drseaorg

Twitter: Twitter.com/drseaorg

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