



DRSEA INFORMER

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Cambio (Change Up) – My heart dropped like a Pedro Martinez sinker when I heard that the New York Mets were courting Sandy Alderman, baseball’s super repairman, to replace ousted general manager Omar Minaya. After all, he had been heading the baseball reform movement in the Dominican Republic and included a number of DRSEA



priorities, including education, in his platform.

Sandy Alderman

Alderman was always the frontrunner for Mets GM, having secured Commissioner Bud Selig’s support to seek the position, so I was not surprised he got the job, but I am disappointed he will not be around to directly finish what he started. However, Alderman has assured me that the momentum he created for baseball reform in the Dominican Republic, and for all of Latin American, will not wane, “nor will I abandon the work in the DR that I have initiated and have an abiding interest in seeing through to completion.” He added that he remains committed to several educational initiatives that the DRSEA has promoted.

While I believe Alderman is a man of his word, it will be interesting to see how the path he cleared in the Dominican Republic is pursued. Major League Baseball named Jorge E. Pérez-Díaz, a partner in the Puerto Rican law firm Pietrantonio Mendez & Alvarez LLP, as the interim head of Latin American Oversight for Major League Baseball.



Jorge E. Pérez-Díaz

When Alderson first took on the monumental task of addressing the myriad of issues plaguing Dominican baseball, including age and identity fraud, steroid usage among prospects, and skimming of prospects' signing bonuses, I was optimistic but concerned. Alderson brought a reputation as a fixer, but seemed keen on being an enforcer as opposed to a peacemaker. He ruffled more than a few feathers with a "We will do this my way" attitude.

But several people I know in baseball said that Alderson is blessed with a high learning curve and quickly realized that things don't work the same in the Dominican Republic as they do in the U.S.; that things are more complicated and take far more time to accomplish and he adjusted accordingly.

Alderson drew up a reform blueprint and Pérez-Díaz has said he will follow that plan. It includes Alderson's desire to address the education of prospects. Under the new plan, all prospects will take a test to measure their academic standing, with an understanding that teams will be inclined to pay more for better educated players. The new program will mandate education for prospects at all academies in the Dominican Republic; Major League Baseball is also establishing a tuition fund to assist players who wash out of the academies and want to continue their education.

Currently, only the Pittsburgh Pirates have a mandatory education program, and the San Diego Padres have a voluntary one that continues support for those who fail at professional careers as is the case with 98 percent of prospects.

Such educational initiatives have been advocated by the DRSEA for several years and are welcome, as was Alderson's acknowledgement that the DRSEA's mission to prepare baseball players to secure scholarships at U.S. colleges and universities is viewed as a piece of reform solutions in Dominican baseball.

I recently told Alderson that I thought the greater good of baseball would be best served by him continuing to conduct his reform movement, so while I congratulate him on his new job, I am saddened over his departure from the Dominican Republic.

I do not know Pérez-Díaz, who has been working with Major League Baseball on Latin American issues since January, but he will consult with a three-person Latin American Oversight Committee comprised of Alderson; Larry Beinfest, President of Baseball Operations for the Florida Marlins; and Bill Smith, Senior Vice President and General Manager of the Minnesota Twins.

Dos Caminos Se Bifurcaban (Two Roads Diverged) – In every life there are crossroads, decisions that are made that alter our lives, sometimes for the good, sometimes not so good. I have made several, including the decision to move to the Dominican Republic two years ago to pursue the creation of the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy.

One of the first critical decisions I made in life was picking Lincoln University (PA) to attend. I had actually wanted to go to George Washington University because I liked D.C.; my mother wanted me to attend Swarthmore College. My dad, however, reminded me of the cost of both, and pointed out that he had just finished paying for three years of private school. One of his perks as a professor at Lincoln was a free education for his children so I knew he could not complain about that. I figured a year at Lincoln and I could transfer, but the Lincoln experience proved to be so complete and wonderful that I stayed and graduated. I made friends I have held close since those days and I would match my education against any college or university. I chose the right path.

Since graduating from college I have made many career choices, mostly following my love of writing to a number of newspaper jobs and to a master's degree in journalism. I have had the privilege of writing for some of the most prestigious publications in the world.

But I felt my true calling when I first wrote about sports and saw the disparity in the industry. It was as if people of color could catch footballs, shoot basketballs, hit baseballs, run fast, and earn millions for colleges and universities, or for professional teams. But those same people of color could not coach teams, could not be sports agents, shoe manufacturers, clothing makers, could not own a piece of the industry. So I became an advocate of inclusion, for expanding minority involvement in the industry of sports.

Ultimately, that led to me actually working for a couple of organizations that wanted to challenge the sports industry on inclusion and I had varying success with both.

When I was with one of them, I fell in love with a Dominican woman who lived in New York. It was my love for her that started by love affair with the Dominican Republic. I wanted to learn all things Dominican; on my first trip here I had a sense of *déjà vu*, like I had been here before. In hindsight, I think it was a sense of what lay ahead for me in this country.

I jumped at the chance to continue my sports advocacy in New York, to be closer to the woman I loved. It was a path that did not work out, first with the woman and second for the job, but I was able to affect some change that I am very proud of, including a critical report in 2000 on baseball academies in the Dominican Republic that led Major League Baseball to open an office in Santo Domingo.

And, as I saw the number of Latinos increasing in baseball, particularly from the Dominican Republic, it became clear in my mind where my destiny lay. I recall a conference here I helped plan that included a number of Dominican baseball prospects. We provided them with some insight into financial planning, selecting an agent, and to

acculturation, all areas MLB said they educated players about. Imagine my surprise when the first question from one of the prospects was, "How do I open a bank account?"

It was at that conference the seeds for the DRSEA were sown. The need was so clear, so apparent, as was the knowledge that MLB was not filling the educational void. My friend and associate, Harold Mendez, and I brainstormed for countless hours on solutions, knowing that we could never help everyone, but we knew we wanted to make a difference. We knew that the passion for baseball and the dreams it offered were not enough, not when 98 percent of those who make it to academies here never succeed in the majors. Harold and I felt we had to offer an alternative, knowing that it would be education, not baseball, which would provide salvation in the long run. If we could use the lure of baseball, and combine it with the power of education, we could harness something unique.

We labored over our design, but finally decided that we wanted to develop an academics and sports model, create from scratch an opportunity young baseball players could pursue that would give them the parachute they needed when baseball abandoned them, as it does all but two in 100 prospects. We rationalized that if they could do well in the classroom and on the baseball field, there would be a chance to impress colleges and universities in the United States into offering baseball scholarships. Only 5 percent of college players are Latino, but Harold and I believe that an infusion of Dominican players into the college game will do much the same as it has done for Major League Baseball.

If those Dominicans who do get college scholarships make it to the majors, wonderful. The fact is that 55 percent of the players drafted in the first four rounds of the draft, the so-called money rounds, are college players, so there is an added financial incentive to play college baseball. But the real value of college is the education it provides, and with 80 percent of Dominicans never going past the eighth grade, the need for education is clear. And with the high collateral damage in developing Dominican baseball players, to provide some with a college education, something that would permit them to be professionals in something other than baseball, is beyond logical. It makes sense to the future of the Dominican Republic because the hope of any nation lies in the education of its youth.

And so it was that I moved to the Dominican Republic two years ago, to further lay the foundation for the DRSEA, to establish the visibility and credibility needed to have the dream reach reality.

It has been an interesting, even fascinating two years that have changed my perspectives on life. A year ago I wrote in the **INFORMER** about my sadness and joy, frustration and exhilaration, hope and despair, satisfaction and disappointment, tranquility and fear, excitement and boredom, friendship and loneliness - the wide range of emotions that have come into play in this journey. We have found land for the dream and lost it, have had broken promises and promises kept. There have been people who have used the dream for their own profit and returned nothing. And I have had to keep in mind every day that things do not operate the same here as in the United States, that the process to accomplish things is much different and takes time and that in itself creates angst.

But every day we get one step closer, convince one more person to embrace the dream. Every day there are inquiries from teachers who want to join the project, from parents and young boys who want the education we will provide, and from college baseball teams who believe our graduates will help them raise their baseball stock.



DRSEA Board retreat July 2010

And Major League Baseball, in the midst of a reform movement in the Dominican Republic, appears to hear our voice. A year ago, the **INFORMER** called for baseball to consider fingerprinting to curtail age and identity fraud among Dominican prospects; a few months ago, fingerprinting was indeed added to baseball's reform repertoire. And, I was encouraged by a conversation with Sandy Alderson, the man baseball hired to head the reform, that education is a part of the solution to the problems plaguing baseball in the Dominican Republic, and that the DRSEA can and should be a factor in that educational process.

UN PASO MAS Y LLEGAMOS.

With a lot of work and a lot of luck, we expect to open our doors in six months, in an abbreviated version from earlier expectations, but the goal now is to get started and expand as time goes on.

But we still need a lot of help from those who share the vision for the DRSEA, from those who see the ultimate value of the project in a variety of terms; for baseball, for education, but ultimately for the lives we can improve through the DRSEA experience, and what those lives can ultimately do to improve the Dominican Republic.

We continue to ask your support in the form of a donation to the effort, but also through suggestions on our mission. We want people to embrace the DRSEA as their own. We all have a responsibility to help those less fortunate and one of the things I have come to realize by living here is that I am blessed, that I have been fortunate and I have an obligation to help others.

I felt a connection with the Dominican Republic the first time I visited 15 years ago and that connection is stronger today and gets stronger each day; it has been life changing. While I have had my share of people who have been less than honest, I have made friends and also made peace with myself, knowing that I am following my dream, that the path I have chosen is the right one.

I recently returned from a visit to the United States and again count my blessings for what America stands for, but I also know that the Dominican Republic has needs I can assist. I hope you will join me today in helping to address those needs, in helping to make the DRSEA a reality, the sooner the better. Your help will make all the difference.

The Road Not Taken

***Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.***

***Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.***

***And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.***

***I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference
- Robert Frost***

Déjà Vu Otra Vez (Déjà Vu All Over Again) – More than a year ago, I wrote in the **INFORMER** about my concerns over what I thought would be the wave of the future – the propagation of independent academies dedicated to developing Dominican baseball players.

Among those banking on developing and delivering Dominican talent to Major League Baseball teams is Steve Swindal, the former son-in-law of the late George Steinbrenner, whose camp is across the street from the New York Yankees academy. I wrote in October 2009 that I knew of at least three other such academies in the Dominican Republic and one in Nicaragua, and suspected that others were libel to crop up in the race to mine Dominican baseball talent. The camps operate on the principle that they will take a percentage of a bonus once a player is signed by a team, recouping their investment.

So I was not surprised with a recent article in the *New York Times* by reporter Michael Schmidt that detailed what he called the new exotic investment in Dominican baseball. After all, I had discussed the growing phenomenon with Schmidt a number of times in the past year, sharing with him my views and providing him with leads. So while his article did not mention me or the DRSEA, I feel the DRSEA has once again proven that our understanding and comprehension of Dominican baseball places us in a leadership position and increases our credibility. To understand problems puts you in a better position to solve

them, and we believe the DRSEA is part of the solution to problems in Dominican baseball, and while we may not get credit, others are listening, including Major League Baseball.

My concerns about the proliferation of investment camps is not their existence, but how they operate, because as independents they are not regulated or provided oversight as are the academies of Major League Baseball teams. Back in 2000, when I visited several academies, I found horrible conditions at several and a report I filed led MLB to open an office in the Dominican Republic. Academy conditions have improved immensely since then.

But these independent investment camps are unregulated, so my concern is over both facility conditions and the safety and comfort of prospects, some as young as 13. I visited one of these camps, located at a site the DRSEA was once interested in acquiring, and saw what I considered to be a well-kept facility inhabited by 20 or so kids happily pursuing their baseball dreams. I was told that investors take 35 percent of a prospect's signing bonus. Education is offered either on Saturday or Sunday, not enough from my perspective, but something is better than nothing.

And while this particular camp is pristine and I have no reason to doubt the integrity of the chief investor, who I have met, who is to say other investors in Dominican baseball will not exploit the system at the expense of young and naïve boys? The Dominican baseball system is already rife with problems that Major League Baseball is trying to address.

This new level of *buscones* who sell baseball talent to MLB teams merits watching carefully as pointed out in Schmidt's article, in which David P. Fidler, a professor of international law at Indiana University, said, "*Buscones* in the Dominican Republic are in the business of selling children. And it's very disturbing that American investors would come in to profit from a system that exploits and discriminates against young children."

Estoy Listo Para Mi Encuentro (I'm Ready For My Close-up) – It took place in Santo Domingo and the carpet was green, not red, but the 4th Annual Dominican Republic Global Film Festival was a spectacle Hollywood would have been proud of and I was fortunate to be able to participate.

As one of the people featured in the documentary *BUSCON: Searcher, Swindler* that was screened at the festival, I was not only a special invite, I also served on a panel discussion following a screening that included Hall of Famer Juan Marichal, former Dominican stars Sammy Sosa and Pedro Martinez, and home run king Barry Bonds, and was aimed at discussing problems and solutions in Dominican baseball.

BUSCON takes a look at Major League Baseball's search for talent in Latin America, focusing on the practice in Nicaragua. The director, Anthony Alcade, a Nicaraguan himself, saw firsthand the exploitation of a relative who played baseball and decided to document the system.



Scene from BUSCON

I am featured in the first five minutes of the film, talking about how I believe *buscones* are a “necessary evil” in Latin American baseball. These scouts scour countries for talented baseball players, often providing food, shelter and other resources to prospects as they attempt to interest Major League Baseball teams in signing them. That is the necessary part, as teams need the *buscones* to discover and deliver talent.

The evil rests in the corrupt side of the business where *buscones* encourage prospects to lie about their age and identities in order to get more money from teams; encourage young players to take steroids to become bigger, faster and stronger; and often take up to 50 percent of a prospect’s signing bonus.

While set in Nicaragua, the scenes in *BUSCON* are replicated throughout Latin America, wherever baseball reigns as king and Major League Baseball looks for the next generation of players that it can develop cheaply. And no place is the system more prevalent than in the Dominican Republic which is second only to the United States in providing major league players.

I saw the entire film for the first time at the film festival and had to remind myself that it was not shot in the Dominican Republic, as the faces of the young boys look like those here as they exhibit the same passion and drive to achieve the dream of playing in the big leagues, a dream only a miniscule percentage will achieve, but that dream merchants peddle nonetheless.

At the site of the first screening, I was interviewed by Dominican television and the glare of the camera lights had me anxious but excited. Everyone associated with any of the films being screened was treated with celebrity status, something I am uncomfortable with. The first screening was to a group of preteens who all turn in their seats to look at me after seeing me on the big screen. I am surprised after the film when they line up to get my autograph, asking that I write something for them in English. When some of the older volunteers working with the festival also request an autograph, I am flattered. Eat your heart out, De Niro.

The official opening of the festival was a grand affair at the *Teatro Nacional* complete with a host of celebrities including Benecio del Turo, Claudia Cardinale, Nadine Velazquez, and Roger Guenveur Smith, as well as Marichal, Bonds and Sosa and a number of international directors and producers eager to promote their films. I again walk a green carpet before live television cameras, praying I do not stumble and fall for all of the Dominican Republic to see. Several people ask me to pause to take my picture and while I oblige, I am again uncomfortable with the unwarranted attention.



Benecio del Turo



Claudia Cardinale

The main premiere is a new movie, *Mother and Child*, starring Naomi Watts, Annette Bening, Kerry Washington and Samuel L. Jackson, a film I thoroughly enjoyed and recommend, though I was a bit embarrassed by the fact that there was nudity and profanity and Leonel Fernandez, the president of the Dominican Republic, was seated a few rows behind me. I kept wondering what he was thinking; then again, he's a grown man, right?

President Fernandez was also present at the Santo Domingo screening of *BUSCON*, which was warmly embraced by the audience that included my good friend and DRSEA Board Member Cesar Geronimo, a great baseball player in his own right.

A panel discussion on the film followed the screening, with Marichal, Bonds, Sosa, Martinez, me and others debating Dominican baseball.



Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernandez is flanked by baseball stars Barry Bonds, Sammy Sosa, Pedro Martinez and Juan Marichal, among others, including myself.

President Fernandez took a group of us to dinner following the screening, to a fantastic restaurant in Boca Chica that jutted out into the ocean to be silhouetted under the moonlight and stars. I was fortunate to be seated next to Martinez and enlisted his support for the DRSEA.

President Fernandez spoke about his love for baseball, recalling that when he was a child in New York, he used to go to the old Polo Grounds to see the New York Mets play. He said he always looked forward to the San Francisco Giants coming to town to play the Mets, particularly if Marichal was pitching. The stands were awash with thousands waving the

Dominican flag, he said, “and it connected me; there was a Dominican identity. That is how I connected with baseball.”

All in all, I was totally impressed by the film festival, which was held simultaneously in six cities in the Dominican Republic and in Port-a-Prince, Haiti, at 10 different venues with 150 participants from over 30 countries. About 50 films were screened during the week, and numerous workshops and panels on films and the film industry were conducted. It was an outstanding tribute to international filmmaking and I was proud to be even a small part.

Charles S. Farrell

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