



# **DRSEA INFORMER**

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***Atras Hacia El Futuro (Back To The Future)*** – Back in the spring of 2000, I headed a Major League Baseball sanctioned fact-finding expedition to take a look at baseball academies in the Dominican Republic and develop a proposal, to be considered by MLB, to improve conditions. It was an eye-opening experience that continues to guide many of the decisions regarding the creation of the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy.

The Pittsburgh Pirates opened a new training facility here recently, showcasing how things have improved since my trip nearly a decade ago.

Baseball was brought to the Dominican Republic in 1866 by Cubans who had learned the game from American sailors and it exploded in popularity. The first baseball teams were founded in either 1894 or 1895. Some of those teams still exist today.

When the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo became president in 1930, he took control over every facet of the country, including baseball, micromanaging its development. He built the first major stadium and provided the economic and political support to make the sport the national passion.

The Dominican baseball circuit became one of the top levels of competition in the world and was greatly influenced by marquee players from the Negro Leagues, who, of course, were not permitted to play in the Major Leagues back home. These players included Satchel Paige, who played for the baseball team operated by Trujillo and also recruited players including Josh Gibson, Leroy Matlock, Harry William and Cool Papa Bell to join him. Many of those players returned to the U.S. as Trujillo's All-Stars, barnstorming the Midwest with their exceptional skills.

Over the next two decades, Dominican baseball players developed great acclaim and in 1956 Ozzie Virgil joined the New York Giants, becoming the first Dominican to play in the Majors. Others that followed – Juan Marichal, Manny Mota, and the Alou brothers – solidified the Dominican Republic's place in baseball, becoming a Mecca for players in the Big Leagues to come and further their talents.

During the 60's and 70's, baseball academies began to spring up in the Dominican Republic to take advantage of the talent pool and today every Major League team has an academy or ongoing representation here.

When I visited half a dozen camps back in 2000, I was astonished at the vast dichotomy of what teams offered and provided for their players. At one end of the spectrum was Campo Las Palmas, the LA Dodgers' academy that reminded me of a plush summer camp with well-manicured grounds located on 75 acres and complete with two full and two half baseball fields, a kitchen, dining room, recreation hall and two twin-story dorms that can house up to 100 players. I remember even today how terrific the food was, with crispy fried chicken, savory beans and rice, and plenty of salad and other greens.

At the other end of the equation was a facility that looked like a jailhouse, complete with bars on the players' rooms that they said were locked at night, ostensibly to keep players from robbing each other, but I couldn't help believe the bars were to keep the players from escaping. Dinner that night was bread and cheese.

Another academy was equally as bleak; its "classroom" a blackboard and a few chairs set up outdoors next to a bathroom whose toilets had back up, emitting a wrenching odor that made it impossible to stand near, let alone receive an education. Other academies were similarly barren and uninviting, with minimum facilities for human habitation.

The proposal developed by the group I headed recommended numerous changes, not only in housing conditions, but also in its offerings beyond baseball. Unfortunately, powers greater and greedier than me gave instructions to include a ridiculously out-of-the-ballpark budget for implementing the proposal and MLB took a pass. Fortunately, MLB opened an office in the Dominican Republic by the end 2000; I would like to take a little credit for that development.

Since then, many teams have been building new, modern facilities to house their developing players and the transition has been impressive. Last fall I visited the Mets' new academy and was reminded of a California or Southern Florida college campus, with lots of open air space, dorm suites, expansive cafeteria and several classrooms. Even a computer room. And, of course, great baseball facilities.

I was supposed to have attended the recent opening of the Pirates' new Latin American headquarters, but my plans were derailed by a strike that closed the main road to the location. I was told that if I took a circuitous route maybe I could get there in about three hours. *If* and *maybe* are words I don't like to hear in the Dominican Republic because they are part of the reality of uncertainty that makes life interesting, but sometimes frustrating.

This was one of those frustrating times because I was looking forward to seeing the new facility, and also reconnecting with Roberto Clemente Jr. and his brother, Luis, the sons of baseball legend Roberto Clemente, who was having the baseball field named after him. I know the Clemente brothers dating back to my days in Washington, DC, when I helped to start an RBI program.

From reports and pictures, the new Pirates facility sets a new standard against which all academies will be measured. It has a façade that resembles the Pirates major and minor league facilities and was done so that design is functional as well as aesthetic.

Sitting on 46 acres amidst mango trees and two lagoons, the academy features dorms rooms that house two to four players as compared to the prison-like bedrooms in the old facility that were lined with bunk beds.

And, of course, there are the baseball facilities, which include a covered batting cage with four tunnels. Behind that are six mounds from which pitchers can toss their bullpen sessions. There are two full fields and a half field that can be expanded, and a grassy field solely for conditioning.



There are also facilities for players to occupy themselves off the baseball fields. Game rooms offer pool tables, ping pong tables and the inevitable video games. Also at the new academy is a dining facility that allows the Pirates to monitor the nutrition of players, and the players have their own weight room.

There are also classrooms, a change from the Pirates old facility where there was no space for such fancy. A press release states that all players are required to take English classes and a variety of academic offerings gearing them to pass a high school equivalency test.

"We would be doing a disservice to the country and a disservice to these young men if we didn't do everything we could while they were here to give them the type of education that will allow them to have a career and something to fall back on if baseball playing doesn't work out for them," Pirates President Frank Coonelly said.

If the Pirates follow through on Coonelly's pledge, then maybe a new standard for service to players will be established by providing them with the foundation for real opportunities beyond baseball. Only time will tell.

As I said, this is a long way from what I saw in the Dominican Republic almost a decade ago. Teams are investing more time and money into taking care of players, improving their treatment. After all, somewhere, someplace in the Dominican Republic, the next Sammy Sosa is swinging a bat, the next Pedro Martinez is tossing a 90 MPH fastball, the next Alfonso Soriano is chasing down a fly ball.

Baseball will take care of itself in the Dominican Republic because it is the business of baseball to do just that and the Pirates new facility, and other new facilities by a dozen other teams over the past few years, reflects that. But I still think baseball has responsibilities that extend beyond the game and into the sport of life. I continue to hope it improves on that commitment.



New Pirates training facility in Dominican Republic

***Memorias Del Dia De La Madres (Mother’s Day Memories)*** – In the yard in the back of the house where I grew up stands a tree, my favorite tree. No, not my favorite kind of tree, my favorite tree.

I have never been absolutely sure what kind of tree it is. Speculations have varied over the years, but nobody took the time to find out for sure, and finally it didn’t matter, really, what kind of tree it is, just that it stands, older now, gnarled by time and weather, still majestic in place and purpose.

Every year at this time, the tree explodes with its springtime bounty, giving birth to bright pink bouquets of flowers, so full they weigh the boughs. I remember traveling home over the years from just about anywhere to always be home at this time, not necessarily by design, but there I was, watching this tree mark the passage of time with its annual plumage.

From the time I was a child, I would sit in the kitchen with my mother year after year as she would marvel, “Oh, I just love that tree. Every year it just looks so beautiful at this time. But it is only for a short time.” And a soft breeze would send the fragrance of the blossoms our way as we sat gazing at our tree and the closeness it brought us.

The blossoms were gone within a week; the tree lost its mantle but not its place in my heart as it promised to return, same time next year. It has always kept its promise.

My mother is gone now, but the tree still stands and even though I am far away when it blooms this year, I can close my eyes and the breeze of childhood memories stirs the windmills of my mind. And I am right there in the kitchen with my mother, looking at our tree.



My brother, Terence, snapped a photo of my tree in full bloom. Thanks, T

***Informe De Progreso (Progress Report)*** – I have now been living in the Dominican Republic for six months and it has been a tremendous experience, both professionally and personally.

Personally, I have grown a great deal. I have gained a lot of perspective on life, realizing I have taken much for granted, when in reality nothing is a given. I have been blessed with having good parents, a good education, good health and good friends. And, I am currently blessed with being able to chase my dreams, to create the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy and improve the lives of others through education.

On the professional side, things move forward, but often at a frustratingly slow pace, as the faltering economy continues to take its toll. We are narrowing the search for a site for the DRSEA, but here Land + Baseball = Expensive. But with price tags in place, hopefully it will be easier to raise the needed funds to break ground within the next six months.

I also continue to meet great people who are willing to help move us step by step closer to realizing the DRSEA. Iris Nunez, an attorney in Santiago, who heard about us and volunteered to assist the effort. Juan Casimiro, a specialist in entrepreneurship and organizational development appeared out of nowhere. People like John Watson, Cesar Geronimo, Cecilia Mota, Jack Delman, Linda Haithcox, Susan Van Lier, Ray Sallay, Keith Lee, Joe Brown, Valoree de Lebron, Valinda Valdez, Franklin Guerrero, Juan Matiz, and others provide invaluable input into our development. And friends like Glenn, Paco, Jose, Isvanel, WCK, and a host of others provide support and encouragement daily.

And I could accomplish nothing without the friendship and commitment of my co-founder, Harold Mendez, who always seems to know when I am down and provides just the uplift I need to persevere. He has been there with me and for me every step of the way and I know he will be there when all the bricks are laid in place.

Yet, I still sometimes think back to the day last October when I was headed to the airport to move to the Dominican Republic and the doubts that flooded my mind. There was, and still is so much to do: Identifying and securing land, building facilities, developing a course of study, hiring teachers and administrators, and finding students who have both the athletic and academic inclinations to succeed, to mention just a few. And raising money; always raising money. It remains a daunting task that can overwhelm the mind if you let it; I always feel like I am forgetting something crucial.

There is a tale about an architect who set about to design the perfect library. He calculated every angle to maximize space usage, sunlight, access. But after completion of the library, it began to sink about two inches a year. He forgot to calculate the weight of the books. I keep asking myself, “Am I forgetting the books?”

Yet each day I renew myself to completing this journey, to making the DRSEA a reality because living here does give me new appreciation for my own life and those of others less fortunate. I know I have set a lofty goal, and it is often mind-numbing, but I remember the words of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, minister, educator, scholar and social activist, who said:



*“It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life does not lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disgrace not to capture your ideal, but it is a disgrace to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach for the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. For not failure, but low aim is sin.”*

## ***UN PASO MAS Y LLEGAMOS***

### ***Otras Noticias De Interés (Other News of Interest)***

***Education Dollars Still Missing*** – When the Dominican government announced that it would provide the Ministry of Education with just over 4 billion pesos, in addition to the money already budgeted, to meet demands that came up during the National Summit discussions earlier this year, the educational community got all excited and celebrated. However, the money has still not arrived and therefore, nothing has been done. These resources would have been allocated to projects such as teacher training, school infrastructure, new furniture and literacy teaching.

According to *Hoy* newspaper, the Ministry still does not have the RD\$4.09 billion that was promised in February. The minister reported that the government is applying for loans from the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank to fund these activities. Meanwhile, Melanio Paredes, the Minister of Education, said that he and the Ministry have prepared the financial planning for spending the additional resources and that progress has been made in the execution of the RD\$33 billion budget approved for the ministry for this year. When this year's budget was approved, several sectors complained that Education should have received 4% of the budget as set out in the General Law on Education.

*Swine Flu's Residual Benefits* – Thousands of tourists who had planned to vacation in Mexico have been arriving in the Dominican Republic, mainly in the Punta Cana area. In somewhat smaller quantities, tourists have also arrived in Puerto Plata. Tour operators serving both Mexico and the Dominican Republic have been re-routing hundreds of tourists, making the most of the similarities between the Maya Riviera and the Bavaro-Punta Cana region. The increase has meant that May will be a record-breaking month. There has been an estimated 40% increase in the number of tourists arriving in the eastern Dominican Republic. Mexico, affected by the A(H1N1) or 'swine flu' outbreak, has seen a drastic reduction in the number of visitors to its tourist areas.

According to *Hoy* newspaper, over 100 additional flights have landed at Punta Cana International Airport. According to the executive vice-president of the National Hotel and Restaurant Association (ASONAHORES), Arturo Villanueva, eight additional flights have landed at Puerto Plata, three at La Romana and "eight or ten" at Las Americas International Airport (AILA). Villanueva said he did not have the exact number of passengers arriving, but he said that between 190 and 400 had arrived on each flight. The flights were mostly from Europe and the United States, carrying tourists who enjoyed Caribbean vacations. Fortunately, according to Villanueva, the country is prepared to meet the heavy influx of passengers, both in infrastructure as well as food and entertainment. The arrival of these thousands of tourists coincides with the lowest season for traditional tourism in the Dominican Republic.

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