



DRSEA INFORMER

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Extremidades Del Dedo (Finger Tips) – The response to the last **DRSEA INFORMER** has been interesting, to say the least, with numerous people commenting on the suggestion of implementing a fingerprinting system in the Dominican Republic when children reach fifth grade, the last mandatory grade of education in the country. Such a system could help address the escalating issue of age and identity fraud among baseball prospects in the Dominican Republic by providing a way to match fingerprints to prospects, pretty much assuring identity and age. As I pointed out, the idea is not flawless, but many of the flaws could be addressed if the plan were activated, which would take the cooperation of both Major League Baseball and the Dominican government.

Most readers who responded thought the idea was a good one and worth exploring, but doubted that there would be much interest in cooperation from the Dominican government, mainly because there are other priorities that need to be addressed in the country, like health and education. One thought technology in fingerprinting is not advanced enough, an opinion I disagree with, but he added, “Let's think priorities.....after all, we Dominicans are cheaters of the game of baseball; none of these scandals happen elsewhere.” He did admit his sarcasm.

I was pleasantly surprised to hear from a top Major League Baseball official who told me that baseball Commissioner Bud Selig has assembled a task force to look at a wide variety of issues in the Dominican Republic affecting baseball. That effort is headed by Sandy Alderson, who has a long and distinguished career in baseball, including working with the Oakland A's, the San Diego Padres, and in the Commissioner's Office where he was executive vice president of baseball operations. He is considered an expert on sabermetrics, the analysis of baseball through objective evidence, particularly statistics, especially as it pertains to acquiring undervalued players.

Alderson's stellar reputation has me optimistic that he will at least develop some plausible solutions to the problems that plague Dominican baseball, including age/identity falsification and steroid usage. Alderson has reportedly met with Dominican government officials to discuss problems and solutions, which is a prerequisite.

I am told that Alderson and his colleagues on the committee, including Minnesota Twins General Manager Bill Smith, New York Mets General Manager Omar Minaya, and Larry Beinfest, President of Baseball Operations for the Florida Marlins, are examining the issue of *buscónes*, the street agents who broker deals between young prospects and Major League Baseball teams, and

are often responsible for encouraging their clients to lie about their ages and identities, or take steroids to enhance performance. They are also known for extracting large amounts of money from young and naive prospects.



Sandy Alderson

The *buscónes* are certainly part of the problem, but I don't see why baseball could not address it today by simply insisting that *buscónes* register with the Major League Baseball office in the Dominican Republic and agree to abide by a set of rules that includes limitations on the amount of money they can receive, and that they won't encourage lies about age and identification or steroid use. Major League Baseball pays upwards of \$14 million a year just for the right to operate in the Dominican Republic; surely that should entitle the league to know who its teams are dealing with and that they behave in an honorable manner.

I am also told the committee is looking at potentially raising the signing age of prospects from 16 to 18, perhaps feeling that will cut down on age falsification. I have my doubts. Back in 2000, when I first took a look at baseball academies here, I was approached by a father seeking help. Turned out his 17-year-old son was developing into quite a pitching prospect and he wanted to get his son out of a contract with one team. The reason he wanted to void the contract: His son had lied about his age and was only 15 when he signed; voiding the contract would permit the pitcher to sign with another club for more money.

I think changing the age of consent to 18 will simply change the scenario from lying down about age to lying up; 16-year-olds will pretend to be 18. More frightening is what a 16-year-old might resort to in order to have the size and strength of an 18-year-old.

There is also talk about subjecting Dominican players to an international draft to eliminate some of the scams being run to increase the value of a player, but I don't think this will fly. It would help baseball contain some of its costs in the Dominican Republic, but that is exactly what advocates for Dominican players want to protect against. Currently, any team can go after any player, so it becomes a bidding war that has increased the average signing bonus, which is good for the players. Entering Dominicans into an international draft might mean that a top Dominican prospect would only be in the top 100 in such a draft, seriously reducing initial earning potential, and diminishing the signing power of all Dominican prospects.

I have always been impressed with Alderson and there is probably no better person in baseball to evaluate the Dominican situation. The problems are obvious, but concrete solutions need to be developed to address them. Not all proposed solutions will work, of course, but at least someone is looking in the right direction. Without action, I think it will continue to be the Bad News Biers, and the nails of controversy will continue to be hammered into the coffin of Dominican baseball.

One amusing note. In early 2008, evidence surfaced that one country has become known as the location to go to get fingerprints altered. That country? You guessed it – the Dominican Republic.

Acordando A Un Amigo (Remembering A Friend) – I have heard it said that coincidence is merely God's way of remaining anonymous, but when two pictures of Bennie Lee Turner appeared in my e-mail inbox, I knew a higher power was at work.

Bennie passed away six years ago this summer. His heart simply gave out; one of those inexplicable deaths. I think about him every day, but a little more this time of year and had recently asked a couple of friends if they had any pictures of Bennie they could send me. That was shortly before a pair of pictures arrived from a completely independent and unsolicited source.

I met Bennie when I was a sophomore and he was a freshman at Lincoln University. The Newport News, VA, native had a Southern drawl and charm; I immediately liked him and was impressed by his character and leadership. He served as class president for three years, and was one of my dad's favorites. Many of us thought Bennie would join our fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, but he opted to be a Kappa, though over the years he hung with us so much that many assumed he was one of us.

After we graduated, many of us relocated to the Washington, DC, area and formed a pretty tight click that included me, Bennie, Oscar, Joe Brown, Willie and a few others. Several of us even formed Sports Perspectives International, an athletes advocacy organization that still exists today. We put on a number of forums on the plight of the black athlete in America.

Bennie was always good for a laugh, for breaking the tension, for making people feel comfortable; it was just in his nature. I smile when I recall that when we had a party, Bennie would bring the worst rot gut beer possible, then proceed to drink the imported beer others provided. At the end of the night he would retrieve his donation, which, of course, nobody touched. When we asked why he simply didn't bring imported beer, Bennie would say, "I am not spending my money for people to drink Heineken all night!" We couldn't help but laugh over the contradiction.

A mortician by trade, Bennie took delight in visiting me in a hearse, parking it right in front of my house, then laughing hysterically when neighbors came to offer condolences. My favorite Bennie tale from the crypt was the time he said a widow wanted to bury her husband with a crisp \$100 bill in his pocket to have some spending money in the afterlife. Bennie swore he replaced the money with a check, explaining, "If he can use money where he's going, he damn sure can find a place to cash a check!"

But what I loved most about Bennie was his generosity. He was always willing to help; if you had a cause it became his cause. He was always there, particularly through some dark days of my life. It seemed like whenever I was most down, the phone would ring, and it was Bennie "checking in" on me. He always pushed me to have faith that even when life is at its darkest, things will get better, and they always have.

When my mother passed away, Bennie literally took over planning the service for her, lifting an immense burden off the family and refusing compensation. "I did it for y'all," was his sole reason.

His death was a shock; caught everybody off guard. He hadn't been sick; I had talked to him a couple of days earlier about getting together and couldn't imagine that would never happen. Just shows you how fragile life is.

The tranquility of the Dominican Republic provides me with time to reflect on the past, present and future; I have learned not to dwell on the past, to rejoice in the present, and look forward to the future. But I take time to reflect on Bennie every day; his friendship, his support over the

years, his faith in me, and it helps keep me strong. Whenever I get down, I remember his encouragements. I remember to keep the faith. I remember to follow my dreams. I only wish Bennie was here to share them with me.



That's Bennie on the right, back in the day

El Borde De La Noche Con Todos Mis Niños Buscando Para Mañana
(The Edge of Night With All My Children Searching For Tomorrow) – Okay, I

confess, I watch Spanish soap operas. I hate to make that confession, given how much I used to abhor soaps. I think it was because as a child I used to visit my grandmother during the summer, and she made me stay inside while she watched her “stories.” I just never understood how someone could get so attached to them.

But I have started watching them in the Dominican Republic, in part because I have a friend who likes to come by to check them out. We usually have something to eat, then go to the couch where she takes the remote from me so she can switch back and forth between at least two shows.

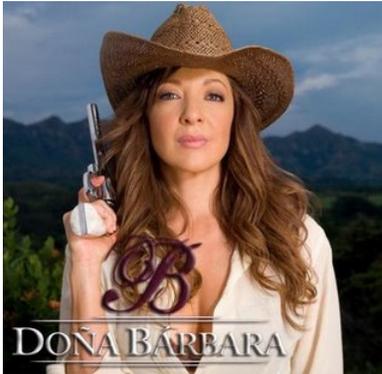
My favorite is *El Cartel*, a Columbian television series about 10 friends who get into the illegal drug business. Currently, one of the main characters, Martín Gonzales, played by Columbian actor Manolo Cardona, cut a deal with the DEA, but it went awry and he ended up in a federal jail in the U.S. Somehow he got released and is back in Columbia, but his girlfriend can't see a future with him, fearing he will be pulled back into the drug syndicate. *El Cartel* is the highest rated program on Columbian television and is quite popular in the Dominican Republic.



El Cartel star Manolo Cardona

I also like *Doña Bárbara*, a Venezuelan telenovela; the plot description: “A courageous, beautiful and strong-willed woman who must rise above heartbreak, betrayal and tragedy. Her troubled

past haunts her, as she confronts her own deep-seated vulnerabilities in the face of an impossible love. She falls passionately for a dashing man and must face her memories head-on. She must fight to keep her secrets from destroying her chance of happiness, fulfillment and true love.” My friend refers to her as a *bruja*, or witch; some would substitute a ‘ b’ for the ‘ w.’



Doña Bárbara star Edith González

While the novelas are entertaining, there is another, more important role they perform for me. Actors, in any language, must announce and pronounce words clearly, slowing and distinctly, and it is no different in Spanish. Given that the plot lines of Spanish soaps, all soaps for that matter, are simple, I get a chance to better hear and comprehend the language. Dominicans tend to speak Spanish at a rapid clip; the soaps slow that pace and give my ears time to practice. *Estoy aprendiendo mas diario.*

Sal En Tus Medias (Salt In Your Sock) – I recently reconnected with Dr. Lillian Beard, a pediatrician in Silver Spring, MD, who sent me a nice e-mail. I hadn’t heard from Dr. Beard in awhile, so it was a pleasant surprise. I met her at a book signing a few years ago on Martha’s Vineyard, where she was promoting her book, *Salt In Your Sock and Other Tried-and-True Home Remedies*. Though she was hobnobbing with the black high society who summer there – as was I – she was very approachable and down to earth; a truly classy lady who I took an instant liking to. We talked about home remedies my mom used to use, including an onion poultice for chest colds. What I like about Dr. Beard’s book is that for each ailment, she offers a medical explanation, warning signs for when to call a doctor, conventional treatments, and a colorful array of folk remedies to try, such as:

- For cold sores, apply cool, wet tea bags (Earl Grey preferred).
- For nosebleeds, have your child sniff a pinch of cayenne pepper.
- For ear aches, fill a sock with salt warmed in a frying pan; hold the sock against the affected ear.

Dr. Beard suggested that there are probably a lot of Dominican home remedies and urged me to be on the lookout for and collect some traditional Dominican family remedies for common ailments that might be considered for her next book. So, my Dominican friends here and in the U.S., send those home remedies to me. I will forward them to Dr. Beard and include a selection of them in upcoming newsletters.



Dr. Lillian Beard

One remedy here I know about is called *mamajuana*, and is a concoction of rum, honey, wine and a variety of herbs. This sweet, amber-colored liquid is said to be a cure-all, mainly used for *la gripe*, the Dominican name for the flu. It is also said to be a good remedy for arthritis, toothaches, headaches and stomach aches; it all depends on what ingredients you chose to introduce to your bottle. There are different versions for getting pregnant (cat or parakeet claws), not getting pregnant, and more. Many people refer to it as Dominican Viagra, as it supposedly increases the libido. I will have to ask Dr. Beard if the beverage actually has a medicinal value.

Otras Noticias De Interés (Other News of Interest)

Talking Education And Social Programs – On a positive note, Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernandez recently led a discussion at the Presidential Palace on quality in education in the Dominican Republic. Fernandez called the meeting "historic." "When in the history of the Dominican Republic has the Presidential Palace been the site of such an enlightening discussion?" he pondered. Fernandez said he is counting on financing from the World Bank or the Interamerican Development Bank for future education plans in the Dominican Republic. Not so positive: Vice President Rafael Alburquerque says a budgetary deficit is forcing the government to cut back on new affiliates to its social programs. Alburquerque said those programs would have to wait until 2010 to reach more people.

Miss Dominican Republic Comes In Second – While Ms. Venezuela, Stefania Fernandez, 18, won the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant in Nassau, Bahamas, recently, Miss Dominican Republic Ada Aimee de la Cruz, 23, was chosen First Finalist. This is the highest position in the contest by a Dominican, second only to that of Amelia Vega, who won the contest in 2003.

"Life is not waiting for the storm to pass, it's learning to dance in the rain."
- Unknown-

Charles S. Farrell

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