



DRSEA INFORMER

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A-Rod, Steroids y La República Dominicana (A-Rod, Steroids And The Dominican Republic) – The Alex Rodriguez steroid controversy shifted to the Dominican Republic after the Yankee slugger revealed that the ‘roids he used were purchased in the country of his heritage. He pointed out, correctly, that the substance he would later inject himself with is available over-the-counter, and a New York Daily News reporter demonstrated the ease of obtaining steroids by completing a purchase in Santo Domingo in two minutes for \$19.

Just about anything you can name is available over the counter in the Dominican Republic; that is not a complaint, just an observation. I once tried to get a medication refilled here and was told I would need a new prescription, which the pharmacist offered to write me on the spot.

Given the ease that steroids can be purchased legally in the Dominican Republic, it is my understanding that there unlikely will be any criminal repercussions with regards to Rodriguez and his cohorts, but it put the whole steroids connection to the Dominican Republic under a microscope. The fact that 42 of the 104 baseball players tested back in 2003 for steroid use are Latino, and the majority of them Dominican, is alarming to say the least.

First, why did a disproportionate number of Dominican baseball players avail themselves to steroids? The answer is fairly simple. The Dominican gene pool just doesn't produce many 6'2" 225 pound men. And the average Dominican kitchen doesn't have a food pyramid on the wall as a guide to providing good nutrition.

That results in a skinny, short boy growing up in the Dominican Republic with the dream of playing in the majors, while the big leagues crave big, strong, strapping men who can hit home runs, throw blazing fastballs, steal bases with lightening speed, or nail a runner at home plate with a missile from center field. Only the strong survive, so get strong is the message being sent to these dreamers.

And with the easy availability of substances that can help them improve performance, the temptation is great. So great in fact that a few years ago a couple of young Dominican baseball players turned to animal steroids for a quick fix. They died.

Back when A-Rod used the steroids he now admits to, they were not on baseball's list of banned substances, so he broke no rules, except ethically. Whether he gets into the Hall of Fame is certainly not something I am going to worry about, and if he doesn't, I am not going to feel sorry for a man who will make more than half a billion dollars in his career. But I am peeved that of the 104 players who reportedly tested positive for steroid use, and were tested under the promise of anonymity, Rodriguez' name was the only one leaked. Major League Baseball needs to look for the leak and punish him or her because its credibility with the players suffered immensely with a loss of trust.

But my main concern is the thousands of young Dominicans who want to follow in Rodriguez' footsteps and become stars and have the riches that go with stardom. My concern is for the young boy who plays baseball on cinders, often shoeless and gloveless, chasing a pot of gold, willing to do anything to turn the dream into reality.

What they need to understand is not only the health dangers of steroids, but that the dream can be permanently deferred if they are caught using. Baseball now tests for steroids and imposes severe penalties for those who test positive.

But the United States government has the ability to impose even harsher sanctions on Dominican baseball players who want to temp the fates and use steroids. Ever since the Mitchell Report on steroid use by baseball players was issued in December 2007, the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo, which issues visas for travel to the United States, has adopted a zero tolerance policy. One official put it to me simply: "Mess with steroids, and you'll mess with your life, your career, and your plans even to visit the U.S. No visa, no baseball, no Disneyworld, no USA."

By the way, the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy has incorporated both drug education and education about nutrition into its curriculum.

A-Rod Da Detrás (A-Rod Gives Back) – While A-Rod has been taking a bat upside the head recently, he also deserves praise for his generous donation of \$3.9 million to the University of Miami to renovate its baseball park which will be renamed after him. The Yankee slugger said he made the donation out of a sense of responsibility to give something back. "I have been so fortunate to have received so much from a game I love so much," Rodriguez said. "That doesn't mean I haven't made mistakes, and unless you've been in a cave under the ocean this last week, you know that I've made some. What it does mean is that I understand only in America can you dream big, work hard, and be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams."



Message to A-Rod: Young people in the Dominican Republic also deserve to dream big, work hard, and be rewarded. That is what the DRSEA is all about.

Cielo En La República Dominicana (Heaven In The Dominican Republic) –

Mark Twain, one of my favorite authors, once said, “If there are no cigars in Heaven, I shall not go.” Well, I experienced Heaven on Earth last week with a visit to Santiago, the epicenter of the Dominican cigar industry.

First, you have to understand a little about my love for cigars, born three years or so ago during a visit to the Dominican Republic. On a whim, I bought a tin of small cigars but soon discovered how relaxing they were over a cup of coffee. But I kid Harold Mendez, my friend and co-founder of the DRSEA, that my obsession with cigars really began when he bought me a humidor for my birthday; I now have 12.

My love of cigars goes beyond smoking them, and I have smoked more than 150 different brands. I love finding out about the blends that go into cigars, their origins, who is the master blender, all phases of the industry. I ever worked for awhile in a cigar shop in New York and produced a cigar newsletter that included my column, *Le Importa Si Fumo?*

Imagine my joy last week in Santiago when I took a cradle-to-grave, or should I say seed-to-ashes tour that included standing in a tobacco field to sitting down after a traditional Dominican meal with a huge cigar that I smoked down to a nub. The rich, dark chocolate soil in Santiago and the tropical climate create the perfect storm for cultivating rolled gold in the millions.

I went to Santiago with my pal Glenn Winston, who moved to the Dominican Republic from San Francisco to export cigars to the U.S. We actually met here over a year ago when I literally bumped into him in a cigar store; we share a passion for the leaf.

We took a bus to Santiago, and although the bus was air conditioned enough to crisp *lechuga*, the trip was beautiful as we meandered through mountains and valleys rich with scenery. There were yucca fields, and rice paddies, plantain and sugar fields, cattle and goat ranches, a mosaic of the expansive agricultural industry that thrives in the Dominican Republic.

But tobacco is king in the Dominican Republic, where more than 6,000 manufacturers churn out over 200 million hand-made cigars a year, or 60 percent of the world’s total.

Our host in Santiago was Juan Alba Nunez, who has spent most of his life in the cultivation of Dominican cigars and knows his business from top to bottom. His partner, Expedito Rosario, who is nicknamed “Tilico,” is part genius, part magician when it comes to his understanding of tobacco. He can touch a living plant and tell you how good a cigar it will become. Magician? More like a sorcerer.

Our tour includes a stop by a company that produces the labels for cigars and as I leaf through pages and pages of labels, I am pleasantly surprised to see bands from cigars I have smoked. The next stops are at factories that produce cigar boxes, things of immense craftsmanship and beauty created by hand, as the cigar industry is extremely labor intensive.

My favorite part of the tour was a cigar warehouse where bales of the precious leaves are going through the aging process, assaulting the sense of smell with aromatic delight. Dozens of women stripped the ripened leaves of their stems as piles reminiscent of autumn leaves multiply. I resist the urge to run and jump and luxuriate in them.



Women processing tobacco



Bales of tobacco



Tobacco drying

Tilico knowingly twists up a crude cigar from several leaves and I light it up. While the cigar is still raw and a little rough, its potential leaps out at me and I wish he would roll up a few more of these ugly beauties for me to take home to mature in my humidor.

Senor Alba's home is surrounded by tobacco plants that are nearing harvest, and after a huge meal that includes *pollo*, *tajadas de cerdo*, *arroz*, *habas*, *ensalda*, and a marvelous concoction of rice and ground beef that includes raisins, we retire to the back yard to light up a finished product, a long tapered maduro that smokes like a dream. Alba takes us for a walk in the tobacco fields and explains that one of his favorite sights is looking at his fields under the moonlight. I completely understand.

As the sun began to set, Glenn and I reluctantly had to return to Santo Domingo, but we did so extremely satisfied by our tour of the making of cigars. There simply is nothing in the world like cigars; if you don't get it, you probably never will.



Me, Tilico "The Sorcerer" and Glenn Winston



Cigar Heaven

DRSEA Website – Remember to take a look at our new and improved website at www.drsea.org. Let us know what you think.

Otras Noticias De Interés (Other News of Interest)

Strengthening Education – The Youth Ministry and the National District Attorney General's office have signed a cooperation agreement allowing college students to complete internships at the Public Ministry as paralegals. The aim of the program is to enable students to gain practical,

real world experience while continuing their classroom development. The National District AG office said they would sponsor this initiative as well as other programs aimed at benefiting young people and would continue to support youth development programs.

Curve Ball – Dominican baseball has been taking it high and inside during a rough off-season, and took another hit when it was revealed recently that a top prospect for the Washington Nationals was not who he said he was. In fact, the player in question, Carlos Alvarez Daniel Lugo (a.k.a. Esmilyn "Smiley" Gonzalez), had changed his identity in order to get signed. There have always been accusations that Dominican players and their "advisors" alter birth dates to increase their draft prospects, as was the case for Miguel Tejada and Bartolo Colon. But "Smiley" reportedly took on a second identity, falsifying documents, birth certificates and even changing his age by four years. Smiley was the Washington National's top prospect and was even compared to Hall of Famer Ozzie Smith when he was originally signed with the Nats in 2006 and received a US\$1.4 million bonus, the largest international signing ever for the Nats. The Nats looked at the signing as a way of establishing a presence in Latin America and competing with the Yankees and Red Sox in the region, but instead ended up opening a Pandora's box that could increase scrutiny on international signings and create a shakeup in the oft times corrupt world of amateur baseball in the Dominican Republic.

The Dominican WBC Roster Is All-Star Caliber – While there is no question about the rough off season for Dominican baseball, attention is being diverted back on the field as the World Baseball Classic 2009 approaches. There has been much hype and controversy with the selection of the 2009 Dominican team with many notable stars originally promising to play, but then backing out. Still, the Dominican Republic has one of the strongest teams in the 16-team tournament. Superstars David Ortiz, Alex Rodriguez and Miguel Tejada have all signed on to play while Albert Pujols, the anchor and staunch supporter of the Classic, has been left off the preliminary roster. Pujols and other players could be added before the Classic starts. The roster includes Catchers: Miguel Olivo and Wilkin Castillo. Infielders: Adrian Beltre, Robinson Cano, Jose Reyes, Hanley Ramirez, Miguel Tejada, Alex Rodriguez and David Ortiz. Outfielders: Nelson Cruz, Jose Bautista, Jose Guillen, Emilio Bonifacio and Willy Taveras. Pitchers: Daniel Cabrera, Edinson Volquez, Johnny Cueto, Pedro Martinez, Ubaldo Jimenez, Odalis Perez, Carlos Marmol, Edward Ramirez, Damaso Marte, Ramon Ramirez, Tony Pena, Juan Carlos Cruz, Jose Arredondo and Rafael Perez. Baseball great Felipe Alou will manage the team.

Charles S. Farrell

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