



DRSEA INFORMER

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El Enigma Del Béisbol Dominicano (The Enigma of Dominican Baseball) – Winston Churchill once wrote about a perplexing situation: “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” That description could easily apply to the current condition of baseball in the Dominican Republic.

There were 81 Dominican players on Major League Baseball rosters on Opening Day; the country produces the most big leaguers of any country except the United States, and includes a plethora of All Stars and MVPs. Yet, the Dominican Republic National Team was eliminated from the World Baseball Classic in the first round, losing TWICE to the Netherlands.

Major League Baseball teams spend an estimated \$100 million annually to develop baseball players in the Dominican Republic; baseball generates \$350 million a year in the country. This includes paying the Dominican Republic more than \$14 million a year just for the right to operate 29 academies. Of a total of \$60 million in signing bonuses for Latin American players last year, \$40 million alone was spent to sign Dominicans. Yet, the development system is rife with scandals involving steroids, falsified ages and identities, and skimmed money bonuses.



I recently had the privilege of serving as a guest evaluator at oral presentations given by seniors at the Carol Morgan School in Santo Domingo. Jack Delman, the head of the school, serves on the advisory board of the DRSEA.

The young man I evaluated made a presentation that centered around the exploitation and abuse of Dominican players in the development system, a problem he blamed on the lack of education of those players. While I think that oversimplifies the problem, education is certainly a key ingredient to addressing the exploitation. Educated people are less likely to allow themselves to be exploited.

But the problem goes deeper. To understand Dominican baseball – and its problems – you have to understand that baseball is ingrained in the culture, as much a part of the Dominican Republic as its food, its music, its language. And that is what makes Dominican baseball (and its players) so great – and so vulnerable.

Baseball is mainly the sport of the poor in the Dominican Republic, and viewed by so many as a way to escape poverty. Mothers and fathers put a glove on boys as soon as they can walk in order to pursue the dream of *la vida buena*.

But with every dream there are dream merchants, those who promise to pave a path to glory and riches for a price. The *buscones*, as they are known, latch onto prospects at an early age, giving them advice and counsel on how best to pursue the dream. Some are genuine in their mission; others simply hook into a potential meal ticket. Either way, good or bad, the *buscone* has become a part of the Dominican baseball scene.

Within that scene is also a compelling need to be younger, stronger, bigger, and faster, to be the exception to the reality of a development system where 95 percent of the participants fail. If you haven't shown potential by age 19, you probably never will, so you pretend to be younger; you lie about your age. And, if you are not the strongest of the strong, a pill or syringe may contain the edge you need to survive.

And always, *siempre*, the dream merchants are there, even some who are scouts paid by teams to discover talent in the Dominican Republic, but willing to skim money from the players they help reach the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Solutions to the enigma are not easy, nor are they instant, because of the nature of baseball here; it is part of the tapestry of every day Dominican life. But because of that reality, it is in the national interest of the Dominican Republic to develop solutions. Let me offer a few observations and/or suggestions.

Age falsification is easy to accomplish here, in part due to poor record keeping. If a birth certificate is "lost", replacing it can be as simple as reassigning a birth date to a child, whether it is accurate or not. Or giving the child the birth date – and sometimes the name – of a younger sibling, or outright substituting one child for another.

But that is changing, as record keeping is getting better and therefore harder to circumvent. And, baseball is cracking down on these age shifters, currently asking the U.S. Embassy in the Dominican Republic to look into possible age falsification by as many as 70 Dominican players, including several top prospects. If lying is detected, those players could be denied visas, jeopardizing careers. The lesson to be learned: tell the truth, because getting caught in a lie will have the dire consequence of a dream deferred.

Steroid use is also having more and more consequence, as baseball tests more and more for banned substances. And, as steroids have become the stuff of scandals, baseball is cracking down even more, issuing stiffer penalties for its use, as is the U.S. Embassy, which is letting players know that they jeopardize their visa status if they are caught using controlled substances.

And what of the dream merchants – the scouts, and the *buscones*? Scouts are hired by teams and should be penalized by teams for abusing the systems and that is what is happening. Several have already lost their jobs as a result of skimming money, hopefully sending a message to the others.

As far as the *buscones*, many view them as a necessary cog in the development of one of the country's most visible exports, so it would be in the best interest of the Dominican Republic to

regulate them. Why not have baseball officials, both MLB and Dominican, develop a certification system that allows *buscones* to register and operate under a system of rules that includes limitations on the amount a player can pay them? Stay within the guidelines and you can continue to provide the guidance some feel is an essential part of player development in the Dominican Republic. Exceed them and face suspension and bans. It works with agents in the United States; at least try it in the Dominican Republic.

Last, but not least, education, while not the ultimate solution to the problems choking Dominican baseball, is a key component. Education makes for educated people; educated people make educated decisions, and educated decisions create opportunities in life. Life gives you many opportunities, baseball gives you only one.

I would like to see Bud Selig, the commissioner of baseball, use the broad powers of his office to act in the best interest of baseball and mandate that every team operating in the Dominican Republic be required to provide a comprehensive education program to players, at the very minimum the opportunity to learn a trade and/or complete a high school degree.

I have said it many times before that baseball is not in the education business, but it does have a social responsibility, particularly given the broad impact it has in the Dominican Republic. Add to that the fact that the overwhelming majority of prospects will never play in the big leagues and that responsibility is clear and present. Give these players opportunities beyond the solo opportunity of baseball so that those who do not succeed will have a life after baseball. It is only fair, given how much baseball is getting out of the Dominican Republic.

Footnote: A study by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida showed the number of Latinos in Major League Baseball has doubled since 1990, up to 29.1 percent in the 2007 season. Signing bonuses for Latino players are comparable – seldom more than five figures – to those of American players taken in the seventh round of the amateur draft. Compared with the routine seven figures given to top American players, it is obvious why more than 450 players are signed each year in the Dominican Republic alone. More than 1,700 Dominican players are currently under contract to Major League Baseball teams.

Deje mi corazon..... (I Left My Heart) – I took a trip recently to San Francisco de Macorís, considered as the third most important city in the Dominican Republic. A pleasant two-hour bus ride from the Capital, San Francisco has had a very active role in the shaping of Dominican history, as it is known as one of, if not the most, politically active cities in the country. That history, sadly, has included a reputation for involvement in the drug trade, something that has marred this quaint little town that is reminiscent, with its sleepy streets, of small-town America. I counted only two traffic lights amid the tranquil parks, churches and row houses.



Santa Ana Cathedral in San Francisco

San Francisco was the hometown of Porfirio Rubirosa, a Dominican diplomat, polo player and Formula One race car driver, but who was best known as an international playboy for his jet setting lifestyle and legendary prowess with women. Rubirosa married Flor de Oro Trujillo, daughter of Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina.

I went to San Francisco to visit a friend, Carolina, a young poet I met in Santo Domingo one Sunday afternoon while sitting on a park bench, enjoying a cigar. We struck up a conversation, she showed me some of her poetry, and got me to promise to visit her hometown. I have come to understand that Dominicans are friendly like that, another reason to love this country.

Carolina's boyfriend, Carlos, met me at the bus station and we went to his home, where I spent a pleasant, peaceful afternoon with him, his mother, and Carolina, enjoying a good meal before I had to catch the last bus back to Santo Domingo.

That sort of Dominican hospitality is typical, and something I had to get used to. People I just met invite me home for dinner. Strangers I ask for directions are inclined to not only point the way, but personally escort me to my destination and wait to escort me back or assist in another way. To be honest, some ask for a little money, but nobody has seemed offended if I tell them *no tengo dinero*. Life is good in the Dominican Republic, in large part because of the wonderful people I have met.

El Arroz Es Agradable (Rice is Nice) – I bought a caldero the other day. The caldero is an essential part of Dominican cooking; it is the traditional pot that rice is cooked in. Doesn't sound exciting, does it, unless you have eaten good Dominican rice. Dominican rice is not unlike steamed rice, but the grains are more separate and *al dente* and the secret is the caldero.



TYPICAL CALDERO

I was never much of a rice eater growing up; potatoes were most often the starch of choice by my mother, though she made a great rice. The secret to any good rice is patience, and not peeking in the pot, or else you can get a gooey mess, which was often what I got. But rice is a staple of almost every meal here, so I have been eating a lot of it, and trying to make it myself. The results have generally been mixed.

One friend referred to my rice as *arroz agua*, water rice, cooked too soft because I added too much water. She insisted on a trip to the store to get a caldero, a metal alloy pot with lid that is the foundation of good Dominican rice.

The secret to Dominican rice is to put a little oil and salt in the bottom of the caldero, let it heat, add the rice, stir, and pour in enough water to cover, then put the lid on. Bring it to a boil until most of the water appears absorbed, stir again, turn down the heat, and wait until most of the water has evaporated. Then wait some more. The waiting results in the special component of Dominican rice – the *concón*. *Concón* is the crispy, crunchy crust of rice that develops at the bottom of the caldero and has to be scraped off to be served on top of the rice or on the side.

I am told that *concón* is the rice that traditionally was reserved for slaves in the Caribbean, until someone observed how much they enjoyed it. It makes sense; the best flavors and nutrients fall to the bottom.

I have seen people fight over *concón*. It does add flavor and texture, and a nutty taste that enhances plain rice. And the caldero makes it so. I got mine with a see-through top, so I won't be tempted to peek. My rice is now *muy bueno!*

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

Dominican Republic Leads MLB – The Dominican Republic is the foreign country with the largest number of players in Major League Baseball. Of 818 roster players in MLB at the start of the 2009 season, 229 were born abroad. The Dominican Republic has 81, which is seven less than in 2008. Venezuela follows with 52, Puerto Rico has 28, Mexico has 14, and Canada and Japan have 13. Cuba has seven, Curacao and Panama four, Australia and South Korea three, Colombia, Nicaragua and Taiwan two, and Holland one. The Seattle Mariners have 15 foreign-born players on their roster. Listin Diario reports that of the 6,973 baseball players in the Minor Leagues, 3,335 are foreign-born.

Easy Money Compromises Hard Work – Cultural anthropologist Tahira Vargas says that easy money has grown to become a social model in the Dominican Republic. She said that the values of hard work and sacrifice to achieve life's goals have been lost. She also criticized the permissiveness of Dominican society and said these new generalized attitudes have been fed by the impunity of government institutions and have spurred criminal activity. "Increasingly there are those who get rich quick, whether by corruption, drug trafficking or politics, and who have become a social model," said Vargas, speaking to an audience of young people during a talk on "Drug Trafficking and Youth" at the Plaza Bolivar, as part of an event organized by the Instituto Dominicano de Apoyo a la Juventud, a youth support group.

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

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