



DRSEA INFORMER

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Buscando El Bosque (Looking For The Forest) – As Major League Baseball struggles to find solutions to a myriad of problems in the Dominican Republic, I can't help but think that sometimes it tries too hard to be innovative – maybe some of the answers are right in front of it.

As reported in the last **DRSEA INFORMER**, Major League Baseball is studying a suggestion first mentioned last summer in this newsletter to start a fingerprinting program for boys in an effort to combat age and identity fraud among young prospects in the Dominican Republic. As part of that initiative, Major League Baseball is also said to be considering starting its own youth baseball league in the Dominican Republic as an alternative to the current system that is corrupted by *buscónes*, the “agents” who find young prospects and sign them to teams, often taking outrageous portions of the prospects’ signing bonuses in return.

As outlined in published reports, the youth league would establish a more organized, and therefore controlled, pipeline to Major League Baseball teams, taking away a lot of the influence and subsequent corruption of the *buscónes*. In addition, the youth corps would be the conduit to secure fingerprinting, with those prints being part of the admission price to play in the league.

I support fingerprinting young prospects, an idea that may or may not fly depending on how Dominican Republic laws protecting children are ultimately interpreted, but a youth league operated by Major League Baseball is a mistake, in my opinion, simply creating another layer of American influence over baseball in the Dominican Republic, and a layer sure to create its own set of problems.

What I would like to see is Major League Baseball support for independent youth baseball development in the Dominican Republic, much as it does in the United States where all major youth baseball organizations receive some kind of support – often grants – through MLB’s Baseball Operations department. Some of that support is as simple as reimbursement for tournament travel.

Doing the same in the Dominican Republic would allow the country to expand the development of its own talent. While some youth leagues are controlled by *buscónes* for their own greed, there are many legitimate efforts that deserve Major League Baseball support. One of them in particular – the Chief Geronimo Foundation – should be a no-brainer for Major League Baseball.

The foundation is named after and run by César Gerónimo, one of the greatest Dominican baseball players of all time, who played for the Cincinnati Reds during the heyday of the Big Red Machine that dominated the National League for most of the 1970's and featured Gerónimo, Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, Joe Morgan, Tony Pérez, George Foster, Ken Griffey Sr. and Dave Concepción.



César Gerónimo

Gerónimo currently lives in the Dominican Republic and started his foundation to support youth baseball in his country. Public schools here offer no sports programs, something Gerónimo says deprives youth of an experience that should be part of their education.

His solution: develop a youth baseball league that establishes teams according to what school you attend, creating natural rivalries for competition and championships. And, tying teams to schools means that young baseball players would have to be attend school in order to play, another plus in a system where so many boys leave school to pursue the baseball dream.

It would seem like an easy decision for Major League Baseball to support one of its own, right? Gerónimo is not only one of the most respected and revered Dominican baseball players of all time, he is also one of the true gentlemen of the sport.

I first met him back in 2000, when he worked for the Japanese Hiroshima Carp as a coach in their Dominican baseball academy, then again in 2004 during a conference I put on here to promote Latino inclusion in sports. He spoke to a group of young Dominican players about acculturation, what they might encounter as foreign players if they made it to the United States. He spoke of the racism and cultural bias he faced when he broke into the Big Leagues, of the need for young Dominicans to be educated, to plan for life after baseball, to be good citizens of the world.

When I moved to the Dominican Republic I contacted César to enlist his support for the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy. He showed up a little late for a lunch meeting, apologizing for the delay caused by having to wait in line three hours, in the hot Dominican sun, for a car registration. He explained that – based on his celebrity – he was offered a spot in the more rapid VIP line, but declined. That is the type of guy I have always found him to be, and someone I would think baseball should be proud to associate with, to support in meeting mutual goals. Hey, this is a guy who left the seminary, of all places, to play professional baseball; are you ever going to find a better ambassador for the game, a better role model for Dominican youth?

So why isn't Major League Baseball working with this Dominican legend; could it be it sees the trees, but not the forest? Simple solutions are often overlooked because of their simplicity. Here is a Dominican icon with a plan for a solid system of youth development at a time when Major

League baseball needs such a plan. Both sides can meet their goals, but the real winners will be the legions of Dominican kids who will benefit.

Naturally, there would be a cost to supporting Gerónimo's school league, but with a \$100 million investment already in the Dominican Republic, and problems with age and identity fraud, as well as steroid use among prospects, can Major League Baseball afford not to look at and support viable development programs that could help address some of those problems through education?

Baseball also has a host of "officials sponsors" that includes soda and beer companies, cars, hotels, snack foods, telecommunications, banks, airlines, credit cards, electronics, fast foods, and others, many with their own operations in the Dominican Republic. They have a vested interest in baseball and the country; Major League Baseball should get them to share the cost of the Gerónimo plan. Again, everybody is a winner.

And while they are at it, Major League Baseball and its sponsors should consider a beautification program to renovate and refurbish fields and stadiums in the Dominican Republic. Many fields are not maintained, providing poor facilities on which to learn and play the game. There are also a number of historic stadiums that are crumbling. One, *Estadio de La Normal*, is the oldest stadium in the Dominican Republic; you can almost sense the ghosts of players past shagging flies on the sparse grass of this deteriorating *campo de sueños*.



Estadio de La Normal

Again, it would be in the interest of baseball to do some upgrades, not only in terms of developing players, but also in terms of positive public relations in the country.

Tigre, Tigre Que Quema Leve (Tiger, Tiger Burning Slight) – Has the world gone mad with this obsession over Tiger Woods and how many women he is bedding? Did Elin beat him? How much money will she get in the divorce? Will he lose endorsements? Will he return to golf? Will he be any good at golf when he returns? Enough already!

The day he made his official apology, I flipped through the channels and came across eight separate simultaneous accounts of Tigermania as news stations, sports shows and entertainment magazines weighed in on the mess that the most famous athlete in the world has gotten himself into. However, I am of the opinion that Tiger is right; ultimately his transgressions are between him and his family to address, not the media. I understand the interest, but the intrusion is unsightly. Tiger is most famous for the magic he creates on a golf course, not in the bedroom, which is private no matter who is inside. Let's just see if he can return to form on the links and then criticize that success or failure.

I was struck by one comment Tiger made, not so much that it reflected a reason for Tiger's actions, but that it is something I think most elite athletes believe at some point. "Normal rules didn't apply...I felt I was entitled," he said.



Over the years, I have met hundreds of elite athletes at all levels and in all sports, and a common thread in their success is ego – huge ego. Part of great athletic ability is great mental awareness and belief in the superiority of that ability. Michael Jordan was a great athlete, but his belief that he would win – that he would make that last-second shot – was what elevated him to superstardom. Muhammad Ali didn't call himself "The Greatest" for nothing. Alex Rodriguez is in the top five in categories like hits in the 7th-9th innings, game winning hits/home runs, hits with runs in scoring position and two outs, for a reason. Serena Williams is at her best when she is down a set or two. Elite athletes have the ability to rise to the occasion because of their mental will to do so. Normal rules don't apply.

But with these great blessings – physical and mental – comes great responsibility in my opinion, responsibility that is sometimes lost in the struggle with ego, of entitlement. I have seen athletes showered with free clothes, shoes, cars, jewelry, hotel rooms. Ushered past the ropes at exclusive night clubs and taken to VIP sections to sip on fine champagne. Nothing they desire is outside of obtaining. I once saw an athlete who had just received a multi-million dollar contract demand – and receive – a waiver of a \$5 cover charge at a nightclub for himself and two friends. Normal rules don't apply.

The temptations of an athlete's life are so prevalent that all of the pro leagues have a rookie orientation to educate players on the numerous vices they are likely to encounter – gambling, drugs, alcohol, and women, to name a few. Some of them listen, some of them don't, as the headlines that document their transgressions indicate.

It is not just athletes. Politicians, actors, musicians – even a reverend or two – succumb to the temptations their egos feed, the sense of entitlement that power, influence and money breed. Ego is part of the stardom they have achieved, part of the driving force that propelled them, but left unchecked, can be destructive. Just ask Tiger.

Tienes Un Minuto? (Got A Minute?) – There are 9 million people in the Dominican Republic and something like 7 million cell phones; many people I know have two and sometimes three cells. And the system is propelled by the purchase of minutes; most people buy phone time on a pay-as-you-talk basis. It all leads to some typically Dominican quirks that are part of everyday life here.

While monthly plans are available, they are sometimes complicated and costly to many, so buying the various dominations of phone cards, or *tarjetas*, is more convenient. But unless you are buying

in large denominations, it really doesn't afford you much talk time. A 100 *pesos* card, about \$2.80, gives you about 15 minutes phone time.

You can also go to certain locations and get a *recarga*, a recharge of minutes that provides bonus time, but you still learn to be judicious. Long conversations are rare; I have developed the 45-second call that inquires about your health, that of your family, what have you been doing, what are you doing tonight, do you want to meet, where would you like to meet, and, okay, see you then. Wasted words are wasted money.



The greatest expression/test of kindness or friendship is how you respond when someone asks you "Got a minute?," meaning they want to borrow your phone to make a call, using your valuable minutes. Interestingly, most people respect the time restraints they request.

And the ultimate test? It has to be the Dominican page.

When I first got to the Dominican Republic and activated my phone, I started getting a few calls where the caller hung up when I answered. Then they would call back and again hang up when I answered. I couldn't understand why until a friend explained that I was getting a Dominican page. You see, making a call has a cost, but receiving a call is free, so when people are out of minutes, or want to conserve, they call you and hang up, hoping – expecting – you to return their call on your *peso*. Once again, a test of kindness and/or friendship, or quite simply a matter of whether you got a minute to spare.

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