



# DRSEA INFORMER

Volume III, Issue 9: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

**Recorridos Del TIEMPO (TIME Travels)** – I spent the better part of a week recently with **TIME** magazine reporter Sean Gregory who is doing an article on Dominican baseball. I hope I was able to add to his comprehension of a complex issue; our travels together definitely expanded my education.

One trip took us to the San Diego Padres academy, a facility I had seen before from the road, mistaking it for a resort. Inside, that notion is reinforced; the \$8 million, 15-acre complex has been referred to as the Taj Mahal of baseball training facilities in Latin America.

The place is opulent, with lush, manicured lawns and flowered pathways that lead to buildings that are grand in design and stature and include classrooms, dining facilities, rec rooms, and dorm rooms that while modest, would do a hotel proud. Players sleep two to a room and share a bathroom with another suite. Up to 70 players can be housed at the complex.

Of course there are baseball facilities; two full fields and a half field, indoor batting cages and covered pitching mounds, plus a weight room. But one of the things that separate the Padres from most of the teams developing talent in the Dominican Republic is that the Padres have a comprehensive education program for prospects. Granted, it is a voluntary program, but the Padres encourage participation and continue the option even if a player is cut.



*San Diego Padres facility*



*Pittsburgh Pirates facility*

While it is not as grandiose as the Padres training academy, I am equally impressed with the Pittsburgh Pirates academy, the newest in the Dominican Republic. I have been to the facility before, but what has taken place in less than a year after opening is amazing and inspirational. The Pirates have a mandatory education program and prospects are getting their high school diplomas; more are on target to complete theirs. I was also moved by a young prospect who six months ago was deemed illiterate. He now reads well and openly reflects on the confidence he has gained through literacy.

What strikes me most about San Diego and Pittsburgh is that if the Padres can provide a voluntary education program and the Pirates a mandatory one, **ALL** Major League Baseball teams can and should provide some sort of education for their prospects. And I think Commissioner Bud Selig should issue a mandate to all teams to provide a minimum education program, using his powers as commissioner to do what is in the best interest of baseball.

In my travels with Sean Gregory, he stops along the road several times to talk to young men about their baseball experience, particularly whether or not baseball failed them, promising but not delivering. Gregory seems surprised that his random selections provide a wealth of case studies; I would have been surprised if they didn't in a country where baseball influences almost every segment of society and every little boy dreams of glory and fame and wealth through the game.

We met one young man who spent some time in the Anaheim Angels camp, and proves it to us by showing us photos of him in uniform. He explains that he was 19 when he signed, but told the team he was only 17, not only to get signed, but to get a decent signing bonus. As a 19-year-old, he said he was offered \$3,500 to sign, but by lying and shaving two years off his age, he says he received \$75,000.

Of that, \$25,000 went to his *buscón* and another \$20,000 to pay off others and to help out with family. He claims to have \$35,000 in the bank, but I doubt it, given his current lifestyle. I think he simply blew the rest and is embarrassed to admit it. He says he later confessed to lying about his age and was soon out of baseball, but now dreams of training young players, perhaps one day brokering talent he develops.

He lives in a ramshackle dwelling with eight people, a home in need of a new roof and many other major repairs. As a pig roots in the front yard, he takes us to an unfinished cinder block building to show us his "gym," which is a set of barbells crafted from steel rods anchored at both ends with cement set in tomato cans. Outside, a tire tied to a tree serves as a target; a net hangs between two trees as a batting cage. Sad as it looks, sadder still is the near certainty that he will attract young clients desperate to succeed in baseball.



*Sean Gregory pumping.....cement.*

We also visit Baseball City, a training complex four teams share, and I finally get to meet Sandy Alderson, the man hired by Major League Baseball to bring change to Dominican baseball, to address age and identify fraud, steroid usage, and *buscónes* excesses. Alderson was attending a

drug education session for prospects, one of the new policies he has installed since taking over as reform czar.

I am struck by how much Alderson looks like a college professor, which he is, flying back and forth to the Dominican Republic from his other job as a lecturer at UC-Berkeley's Haas School of Business. I have been told that Alderson wants to have a meeting with me, but to date that has not taken place, and on this day there is little time for much more than exchanging pleasantries. I do hope we meet soon; I think we have more in common than he might suspect.

One of Alderson's assistants, Juan De Jesus, introduced himself to me and when I told him my name, he said with a curious inflection, "Oh, you're Charles Farrell!" I asked if that was good or bad and De Jesus simply said, "I read your newsletter.....interesting." I let it go at that, apprehensive about what "interesting" meant. I will save that for another day.

My travels with Gregory also took me to San Pedro de Macoris, a town famous for producing baseball players, including Sammy Sosa. Here I met one of the most interesting people in this incredible journey of mine.

Astin Jacobo is a New York raised, City College of New York graduate who scouts Dominican talent for Major League Baseball teams, as his father before him did. He despises the term *buscónes*, equating it to the N-word, and declares that *buscónes* are generally liars, thieves, cheaters and swindlers, things he swears he is not.



*Me and Astin Jacobo*

In nine years as a talent scout, Jacobo says he has signed 60 players to teams, negotiating bonuses ranging from zero to \$600,000. Two of his players made it to the majors, he says.

He justifies taking between 25 percent and 35 percent of signing bonuses, explaining that he has expenses that include feeding and boarding prospects, paying for medical care, and even paying for some family expenses. "I make an investment with no guarantees; why shouldn't I get that back when I can," he asks.

Jacobo says he and other scouts have met once with Alderson to discuss reform, something he agrees is necessary. "We don't want these kids shooting up with steroids; we don't want to deal with them lying about their ages," he said. "That hurts our business, but we need to be included in how the reform is going to be done." He, like others in his business, fears an international draft being implemented and destroying Dominican baseball as it currently exists.

"I don't think Alderson is listening," Jacobo said. "I think he wants to do this all by himself, without consulting us, but we are the backbone of Dominican baseball. He needs to listen to us since we know baseball in this country better than anyone." But instead of listening to them, Jacobo says Alderson actually told scouts to tone down their rhetoric with the media, trim their criticism of baseball, something he refuses to do.

Jacobo says he and other scouts want to police their own ranks, weeding out the corruption and even certifying their members. Right now, he says, too many non-baseball types, with little or no experience, moonlight as scouts, something he would eliminate.

I am personally not wise enough in the ways of Dominican baseball to know what is best for the current scouting troops – call them *buscónes* or not – but I have encountered no one, even those who abhor the corruption in the system, who wants to totally eliminate these talent searchers. Most consider them a necessary evil where the evil needs to be addressed.

Regulating *buscónes* seems a logical course; at least teams would know who they are dealing with and can apply some standards and rules of conduct. Jacobo says he is all for that, and for instituting penalties such as suspensions for those who violate the rules.

Those rules could also include compensation guidelines for *buscónes*. I personally think 35 percent is extremely high, but I couldn't tell you what is fair. But with independent academies springing up to develop talent for teams, some sort of standards are needed.

**Salón De La Fama Del Béisbol Latino (Latino Baseball Hall of Fame)** – Recently, I had the honor of attending the opening of the Latino Baseball Hall of Fame and the induction of its first members in ceremonies in La Romana, where Dominican President Leonel Fernandez was on hand for the festivities.

The new Hall of Fame honored some of Latino baseball's most famous figures in three categories: Those inducted in the Cooperstown Hall of Fame, veterans and contemporary players since 1959. The first group inducted consisted of Puerto Ricans Roberto Clemente and Orlando Cepeda, Panamanian Rod Carew, Dominican Juan Marichal, Venezuelan Luis Aparicio, and Cubans Martin Dihigo, Jose de la Caridad Mendez, Cristobal Torriente and Tony Perez.

Also inducted: executive Alejandro Pompez, reporter Eloy "Buck" Canel, broadcaster Jaime Jarrin from Ecuador and broadcaster Felo Ramirez from Cuba.

The veterans were: Pancho Coimbre from Puerto Rico, Beto Avila from Mexico, Alfonso Carrasquel from Venezuela, Dominican Tetelo Vargas, and Cubans Orestes Minoso and Bobby Madura.

The inducted contemporary players: Roberto Alomar from Puerto Rico, David Concepcion from Venezuela, Felipe Alou from the Dominican Republic , Camilo Pascual from Cuba and Hector Espino from Mexico. Peter O'Malley was the winner of the Tommy Lasorda Award for a non-Latino person who has played an important role in the development of Latino ballplayers. O'Malley is credited with opening the first baseball academy in the Dominican Republic (Academia Campo las Palmas).



Dominican President Leonel Fernandez (left) presents Felipe Alou with Hall of Fame trophy as Minister of Sports Felipe Payano looks on.

Many of those inducted are people I had never heard of, so it was an education for me to find out more about these Latino pioneers who contributed not only to Latino baseball, but also to baseball history.

While the Latino Baseball Hall of Fame is a great thing, I often find it curious why such institutions have to be established; why so many legendary figures don't get their fair recognition by contemporary institutions. Cooperstown has only recognized seven Latin American-born players; more than 500 Dominicans alone have played in the majors, many dominating the game.

I also find it odd that when Major League Baseball celebrated its centennial a few years ago by designating the top 100 players of all time, not a single Latino was included.

Baseball now strip mines Latin American countries for talent; about 25 percent of current players are Latino. Baseball needs to do more to recognize the myriad of Latinos who paved the way.

**Camina Como Un Egyplico (Walks Like An Egyptian)** – Okay, I have a confession. I am crazy about Hoda Kotb. The television vixen has slowly crept into my heart and soul; I rarely miss her *Today Show* program: *Hoda And That Other Woman*.



As a journalist myself, I have long admired her journalistic skills, particularly on *Dateline NBC*. She has this incredible knack of bringing a story to life, making it interesting, conducting great interviews by asking perceptive questions – all without her personality becoming part of the story, a difficult feat in the age of electronic journalism when a reporter's stardom often overshadows the news.

But after moving to the Dominican Republic, I started seeing my beloved Hoda in a different light. Most days, I am at my computer by 9 a.m., reading and responding to e-mail, checking the news on the Internet, arranging my day and week.

The *Today Show* became part of that routine and at 10 a.m., the fourth hour of that show kicks in; that is where my love affair with Hoda really began. As much as her personality is absent from her news reports, it erupts weekday mornings, and I find Hoda has become the sunshine of my day.

First of all, she looks amazing to me. It is like she has determined that this is her time to shine, and she is always radiant. Her features, including her light mocha skin, are perfect for television and she plays them up perfectly.



But I also love her style. She comes across as very intelligent, yet she is self deprecating, able to poke fun at herself. She really seems to be enjoying herself in the role of being herself. Her journalistic skills come to bear, but she is also able to interject her personality into the lighter *Today Show* format, reflecting humor when necessary, and seriousness when that is important, frequently providing her own insights, which I find very intuitive.

Her opinions on a wide range of subjects – from Jeremiah Wright, to Michael Jackson, to Lindsay Lohan, to the Gulf oil crisis, the Haitian earthquake, the latest Supreme Court nominee, Tiger Woods, treating varicose veins, the latest Idol castoff, how to cook a great steak, the New Orleans Saints – make Hoda even more intriguing to me. I think about going to dinner with her and spending hours and hours in riveting conversation and debate.

Adding to the intrigue is that Hoda is an African American. Yes, African American. She was born in Norman, OK, but both of her parents are from Egypt, which, last time I looked, is part of Africa. In Arabic, “Hoda” means “guidance”; “Kotb” means “pole” and is a common surname in Egypt.



The object of my eternal admiration grew up in West Virginia, went to high school in Alexandria, VA, and graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in broadcast journalism. Appropriately enough, she began her career as a news assistant in Cairo.

In March 2007, my Wonder Woman underwent surgery for breast cancer, and permitted *Today Show* cameras to document the ordeal, again testament to the inner nature of this woman who has become an advocate for breast cancer awareness as she intones that life after cancer is better than the one before.

Hoda, I think you are an amazing woman, both personally and professionally. Allow me to invite you to the Dominican Republic where we can discuss the merits of a second term for Barack Obama.

**Buena Suerte, Mi Amigo (Good Luck, My Friend)** – This adventure in the Dominican Republic has including meeting a lot of wonderful people, not the least of whom is Mike Schimmel, the general consul of the U.S. Consulate here.

Mike kind of inherited me from his predecessor, Clyde Bishop, who I was introduced to by a frat brother who had gone to school with him. I thought from the beginning it would be good to know someone inside the organization that issues visas to enter the United States because future students at the DRSEA would need this service. Always good to develop friends in strategic places. When Clyde left the Dominican Republic for reassignment, he introduced me to Mike.

Every month or so since I moved to the Dominican Republic, Mike and I get together for lunch at an Italian restaurant near where he works. The food is good, the conversation great as we talk sports, politics, current events, family and friends, living in the Dominican Republic. But more than anything, Mike has always given me encouragement, introducing me to key people and urging me to stay the course. There have definitely been times when I was discouraged and Mike's support has been just the thing I needed.

But the reality is – and here is where my ultimate appreciation lies – Mike does not have to do what he does. Nothing in his job description requires him to meet periodically for lunch, or offer support or make introductions. He has told me quite simply that he does what he does because he believes what I am trying to do will make a difference. Others believing in the dream helps sustain me in the pursuit.

In a few weeks, Mike moves on to a new assignment in the Philippines and he has promised to introduce me to his successor before he leaves. I look forward to developing a good relationship with her as well, but I am going to miss Mike a lot.

Very often, when people move on we promise to stay in touch and don't. Mike, I will stay in touch. Good luck and many thanks, my friend.

*Charles S. Farrell*

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